

THE LORDSHIP OF LOVE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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KINGSMEAD

THE LORDSHIP OF LOVE

A NOVEL

BY
Baroness Von Hutten

Author of
"Pam," "Our Lady of the Beeches,"
"The Halo," "Kingsmead,"
Etc.

THIRD EDITION

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TO
BARONESS LOUISE VON HUTTEN
MY MOTHER-IN-LAW
AND ALWAYS ONE OF MY DEAREST FRIENDS
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
AS A SLIGHT REMEMBRANCE OF
ALL HER KINDNESS TO ME

B. v. H.

May 4th, 1909

PREFACE

IT may be as well to explain to those of my readers who know nothing of Italian, that the Italian diminutive of Beatrice, "Bice," does *not* rhyme with "mice," but is pronounced very nearly as I have anglicised it, "Beechy."

And may I take this opportunity, in the old-fashioned way, of saying that I hope the British public, always so kind to my books, and so dear to me, may like my poor Beechy as well as they like the very grateful Pam and Tommy?

BETTINA VON HUTTEN

COL DE LA SCHLUCHT,
VOSGES,

May 4th, 1909

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THE LORDSHIP OF LOVE

CHAPTER I

THE STREET OF THE VIOLIN

WHOSE had been the violin for which the street was named no one knows with certainty, but there was a tale that a cripple, dwelling there years ago when the grim old palaces were new, had one warm summer evening been playing in his window when a crowd of gay youths passed and paused to listen.

Knowing the street one can picture the scene : the moonlight cutting the narrow way in two, the sharp roofs jutting against the bright sky, the velvety darkness, the golden moonlight, the lights in some of the windows, the blankness of those behind which good Roman gentlefolk slept. And, pouring down from the high balcony with the delicately fluted pillars, the wailing of the cripple's violin.

The band of gaily dressed revellers, heated by the wine of the feast they had just left, laughing and jesting, pour into the quiet place like a cluster of bright-coloured flowers on a stream. "Hush!" says one.

And they all pause and stem the idle words on their young lips, for he who says "Hush" is their leader. So there they stand for a while, listening, and watching the face of him with the violet velvet cap.

The cripple, unseeing, plays on, the bitterness of his

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heart in his music, and when at last he stops, the youths tiptoe out of the darkness into the light.

"Who plays?" asks the leader.

After a pause the player, leaning over his beautiful parapet, and peering at them, answers surlily, "No one—a cripple."

"A musician, friend," contradicts the other, happily, in his generous young voice, "a great musician. Where are we? What is the name of this street, that I may return?"

But the cripple draws back and is silent.

The youth doffs his velvet cap. "I crave your pardon," he says, still with that invincible gaiety of his, "I shall return, nevertheless, to hear you play to Madonna Luna. And as to the street, I will give it a name of my own—*la via del Violino*."

Then, laughing, he leads his friends down towards the river.

Whether he came back the story does not tell, but one hopes he did. Whether the story is true no one knows, but one hopes it is, for the violet-capped youth, it tells, was Raphael.

At all events it is a pleasant little tale, and every pleasant little tale should be true.

The Street of the Violin, then, was in its glory in the divine Urbino's time, and its vicissitudes have been many.

Roman palaces were built by men who knew their work, and who did it well, and even to-day the great walls are as sound as they were the day they were completed. But they are blackened and discoloured, the coats of arms over the doors are broken and defaced; the great families have died out or sold their unfashionably situated property, and the street, once glorious, has become a street of the poor.

Behind the rusty bars at the lower windows, time-blackened blinds are covered with dust and cobwebs. And under the once imposing archways, where stood portly and dignified major-domos, small and humble shops have

THE STREET OF THE VIOLIN

done their trade for many years. But to a little girl who lived there nearly thirty years ago, the Street of the Violin was a very delightful place indeed. For it was Home to her.

The room high up under the jutting, fluted roof in the Palazzo Vincenzini was the centre of her home, to be sure, for there lived her father, and there she slept, but the street itself, with its cheerful, gossiping swarms of people, its ever-changing excitement, its never-failing variety of amusement, was Beatrice Cavaleone's whole world.

There was an old man who made cane seats for chairs in a small corner shop, and who was possessed of a vast store of useful and thrilling information, which, as he wove his coarse material, he greatly enjoyed giving out to an enthralled audience of one.

It was he, old Lamberti, who told Beechy, as her English mother had called her, all about Garibaldi in his famous red shirt, and Victor Emanuel, *il Re Galant' uomo*, who created the greatest kingdom on the broad earth, and shut up the villainous old Pope. He also told the child about the Coliseum, a distant ruin ten times as high as the highest palace in the street, whither he had once gone in his youth.

"And the Capitol," he explained, taking a huge pinch of snuff, "where the wolves are. Long ago, you know, all the Romans were wolves."

But this statement Beechy received with silent incredulity. Her mind was so constituted that she could not believe certain things.

Lamberti was a kind old man who often shared with her the bowl of macaroni that was brought to him every day at half-past eleven from "The Beautiful Florentine" over the way, and Beechy loved him. Then there was "The Beautiful Florentine" itself, a small, dingy restaurant, with six tables covered with red cloths, and, at the back, between this *sala* (in which hung an exceedingly lovely oleograph of the young Queen Margherita) and the kitchen, a kind of bar where flashed and sparkled not only flasks of wine of the Roman Castles, whose generous richness left a beautiful

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stain in one's glass, but also bottles of golden, and crimson, and green liqueurs.

Signor Benedett', the proprietor of the restaurant, a one-eyed man who had seen the Pope, and Signora Marianna, his wife, were very kind to the Sick Gentleman's little one.

Signora Marianna, who had eleven children, was glad enough to allow Beatrice to sit in the warm, stuffy, untidy kitchen, and keep Peppino and Luisina and Chiarina from falling over the pots and pans ; and more often than anyone knew the Sick Gentleman's extremely humble dinner, the money for which arrived with the utmost regularity, tied in a rag of the child's frock, was augmented by some dainty morsel quite beyond his means to buy.

Old Agnese, too, whose brutal son kept a bird-shop when he was not in prison, where luckily he passed the greater part of his time, liked Beechy, and had once given her a small bird, who sang like a feathered angel, until the cat of a seamstress living on the same landing as the Cavaleones made a meal of the poor little creature.

So it will be seen that for a child who, in slightly better circumstances, would undoubtedly have been lonely, the Street of the Violin was a magic place full of delights, where people were kind and food almost always forthcoming.

Freedom is a most excellent thing, and freedom Bice Cavaleone had unlimitedly ; friends are good, and friends were hers ; health, too, she possessed to a remarkable degree ; and she was very young indeed when she discovered another of her greatest gifts—beauty.

Her father, "Il Signore Malato," as they called him in the street, had been an invalid ever since she could remember—the result of an accident, and never once within her memory had he been able to do more than with infinite pains cross the floor from his bed to the little loggia where, rumour had it, the cripple had played that night to the young Raphael.

THE STREET OF THE VIOLIN

"It is a fatal room," Cavaleone said once, to his only friend, a certain long, lank, haggard old man, known to the street as the Commendatore. "If the legend is true, the violinist of Raphael could hardly walk, Albertino Spada, of my grandfather's time, lived here for ten years with a broken back, and now—*me!*"

The Commendatore, who was roasting a long, thin cigar over a candle, waited until he had succeeded in coaxing the tightly rolled tobacco to ignite, before he answered.

"You didn't hurt your back here," he said.

The Sick Gentleman shrugged his shoulders gaily. "To whom do you tell it? It is a beautiful room, isn't it?" he went on, his musical voice warmed by enthusiasm. "I sometimes believe Raffaele *did* come back—that those scraps of fresco are his. Look at that panel of fruit. Very like the Stanze decorations——"

The Commendatore smiled, the queer smile that drew his mouth so far up under his nose.

"Marvellous man!" he returned.

The child, then about nine years old, who was sitting near them playing with a grey kitten and a string of coral beads, looked up.

"Why is papa a marvellous man?" she asked.

"Because I don't growl and make a fuss, my dear," answered Cavaleone simply.

She looked at him with the dark blue eyes so like his own.

"Why *should* you growl and make a fuss?" she asked, as simply.

The Commendatore, who had hated her mother, glared into a dark corner of the room in a fuming silence, but Cavaleone, laying his thin hand on the child's head, said in French, "She has never seen me different, remember, old friend."

Betty, whose eyes were sharp as well as beautiful, watched the two faces for a moment in silence, and then got up and kissed her father.

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"*I no love—a heem,*" she said, with a nod towards the old man, and her father burst out laughing.

"Run away to bed, dear," he said gently; "you are wrong, for he is good——"

The bed was out of earshot when the two men spoke low, for the old room was very large.

Beechy crept under the covers, and lay watching her father's face as he talked long and earnestly to the older man.

She knew, although she could not hear, that they were discussing her. She knew that the Commendatore did not like her, and she did not care, for he was ugly and silent and crabbed. But she knew that his dislike for her troubled her father.

That evening was one of many very like it, but somehow that particular one stayed in her memory. It was a cold night in November, and the wind howled venomously; loose blinds flapped and banged, something on the roof creaked with a continuous grinding noise.

And within the vast room reigned the darkness that is a part of poverty. The small, bright place, where the two men sat, the yellow light of the cheap lamp, the red glow from the charcoal brazier, which was all the fire they had, sending a faint glow, pale fingers of light, into the encompassing gloom that somehow, to the imaginative child, seemed to increase the howling of the storm, the darkness of the unbroken blackness of the corners of the room.

Her father's long, well-modelled head, leaning, as it always leaned, against the back of the old leather chair in which he lived, was well in the circle of the light thrown by the lamp; a little out of the light, but reddened by the glow from the brazier, the ugly, underhung face of the older man.

And near them, on the deal table that Donna Marianna had procured for them on the final collapse of the one with which Beechy had, she felt, grown up, lay the dominoes with which her father amused himself by the hour.

THE STREET OF THE VIOLIN

" 'Now I lay my down *to* sleep,' " prayed the child mechanically, in the old prayer taught her by her mother, the words of which meant absolutely nothing to her, " 'I pray thy Lord my soul *to* keep——' "

And quietly, happily, her last sleepy glances for her father, she dropped asleep.

The room was poor and sordid, her bed was hard, the air was chill, and winter, enemy of the poor, was at hand, but she went to sleep happy.

For the lamplight, the faint-coloured paintings on the wall, the carved, once-gilded cornice in the dusk overhead—the very pillow, hard as only an Italian pillow can be—these things meant to the little creature, home.

CHAPTER II

A CHANGE OF SEX

LATER, looking back at her own life, the next scene that stood out definitely against the background of shifting, indistinct events, was a very different one.

Her father, some two years after the evening when the wind so howled, lay in bed with closed eyes—the first time she had ever seen him in bed after ten o'clock in the morning.

It was autumn again, but it was broad day, the pale afternoon sun showing up all the poverty of the room, and dancing, through a bottle of water, in a little blot of light, on the wall.

The Sick Gentleman was ill.

At the foot of the bed sat good Signora Marianna, a baby at her breast, and Beechy, herself carrying the baby before last.

The doctor, a short man with an extremely ugly hare lip that made Beechy feel rather ill, had just gone, leaving on the table two bits of paper covered with hieroglyphics.

Silence reigned but for the heavy breathing of the baby before last, a large and inconveniently fat boy of three.

"I haven't a soldo," observed Beechy, after a long pause. "What shall I do?"

Signora Marianna sighed so deeply that she disturbed the last baby, who growled and went to sleep again.

"*Carina povera mia!* I have five francs for the medicine, and the wine—all the wine in the shop is his—that you know. But——! The blessed Madonna herself knows that

A CHANGE OF SEX

I have no money for long illnesses. If poor Benedetto had lived—ah, my dear, *there* was a man ! I always said that his one eye was of more use than the two of any other man I ever knew ! But, peace to his soul, he has gone, and what am I to do with ten living children, and his old mother, God bless her, who eats as much as two able-bodied men ? ”

Beechy nodded. The mixture of complaint and real, honest charity that is in the very poor was not new to her. And she, too, lamented the death of good Benedetto, who had died in the spring of a fever.

“ There is nothing to sell,” she observed presently.

“ No,” assented Signora Marianna.

The clock had gone, the coral beads, a silk gown that had belonged to the child’s mother.

There was a long silence.

Then suddenly Beechy rose. “ I will go and get the medicine,” she said, “ if you will give me the money——”

Signora Marianna fumbled in her dark green skirt, and at length produced two dirty bits of paper which, pieced together, proved to be an ancient five-lire note.

Beechy took them with a careless nod.

“ Thank you, dear Signora Marianna,” she said ; but hers was a nature of the receiving kind. She would give, willingly, whatever she might have, but having little to give did not trouble her, and to accept gracefully, even graciously, was part of her.

Taking up her shawl, an ancient square of deep purple woollen stuff, she put it over her head and shoulders, after the inherited graceful manner of the Roman woman, and closing the door softly after her, went lightly down the dark stairway.

• At the first floor a door suddenly opened, and a boy of about her own age came running after her.

“ *N giorno, Bice,*” he exclaimed, pronouncing properly the diminution of her beautiful name.

“ *Buongiorno, Simeone.*”

“ Thy father is ill ? ”

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The boy was very small, and very dark, with dark, long-lashed eyes, and a musical voice.

Beechy looked at him affectionately. "Yes, Simeone. I am going to the apothecary's to get him a draught. Where are you going?"

Simeone laughed. "I? To the Teatro Leopardi! I am singing in opera."

Beechy's red underlip shot put suddenly in a moment of disbelief. "In opera, *you*? Oh, you little liar."

Simeone was too thoroughly a Roman to object to the term. He laughed instead. "*Ma è vero*. It is true! It is an opera called 'Carmen,' and there is a chorus of boys, and we are paid a lira and a half a week for singing and marching."

In the dark archway that led into the street Beechy stopped short.

"But you can't sing!"

"Yes, I can. It goes like this—ti-tum, tum, tum, ti, deedledey—tum—tum"—he hummed the well-known air, squaring his little shoulders, and pursing his mouth as he did so.

"It's very jolly music. And the baritone gave me some chocolates—and they all fight, and it's *most* amusing!"

"How much did you say you got a week?" interrupted Beechy, her small face very keen under the purple shawl, as she awaited his answer.

"One fifty."

"H'm. And you have no voice! What do they get, those others, who *have* a voice?"

Simeone's jaw fell.

"Who have a voice? What do I know? We are a lot. We must be fifty boys," he bragged. "And when we sing it is beautiful."

It was raining now, though the sun still shone faintly. Opposite, the arched doorway of a charcoal shop, at the back of which glowed a faint fire, looked as if cut out of black velvet.

A CHANGE OF SEX

Simeone watched Beechy longingly. He admired her, but he was afraid of her.

"And the girls?" she asked sharply.

"The—the girls? There aren't any. At least there aren't any little ones," he stammered.

"No little ones? As little as—as *me*?"

Her eyes were suddenly very anxious, and his feeling of manly superiority was restored as suddenly.

"*Chè!* No. All the girls are big—twice as big as you. It is only the boys' chorus who are little. Why we march! Girls don't march."

Beechy looked at him with the faint protrusion of her red lower lip, that was later to be so well known. "Oh, *don't* they?" she said, with a short laugh. "*Don't they?*"

And before he could answer she had darted out into the rain, her purple shawl held tight under her chin.

Simeone watched her for a moment, and then went back to his father's rooms, the wind absolutely, though quite unjustly, taken out of his sails.

The draught bought, and given into Signora Marianna's safe hands, Beechy again went downstairs.

She was very thoughtful, evidently, for her narrow, black eyebrows were drawn together a little, and her full, red lips a trifle fixed.

As she passed Simeone's door she spoke aloud.

"Imbecile!" she said.

Old Agnese, the woman who kept the bird-shop, was sitting over her earthenware pot of red coals telling her beads drowsily, when the door burst open, and Beechy came in.

"*Madonna mia*, what is it? Is thy father worse, child?"

Beechy shook her head as she took off her shawl and picked up the rosary the old woman had dropped. "No, no, he's no worse, but—oh, Agnese, will you lend me a suit of Giulio's clothes?"

"A suit of Giulio's clothes? But, why—what is it, why do you want them?"

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Beechy's blue eyes were grave and anxious, but at the sound of her old friend's voice the child burst out laughing, a big dimple dancing in her right cheek.

"Oh, poor Agnese, do not be afraid," she cried, "it is only that I must earn money. My father is ill, and must have many things, and there is no money, so I must work!"

"Work, yes, we must all work, but—but——"

"It is Simeone Antonetti who sings—sings, *he!*—at the Teatro Leopardi, and only boys can go." Her small face was glowing with excitement, her cheeks as red as roses.

"But you are not a boy," insisted the old woman obstinately, her slow mind not taking in what it all meant.

Beechy clasped her hands dramatically, stretching them, united, out to their full length. "But don't you see," she wailed, desperate with impatience, "if I have on Giulio's clothes, *I shall be a boy!*"

Old Agnese burst out laughing, showing her old faded gums, in which one huge, yellow tooth, like a stag's, still clung. "You will be a boy! Oh, *Mamma mia*, what a child it is, what a child!"

But Beechy's story was tumbling out before she had finished her exclamation, the excited, delighted, confident story, told as she was to tell stories all her life, in a way that inculcated her hearer, at any rate for the moment, with a firm belief in her power to do whatever she undertook.

"And if Simeone can earn one fifty a week," she wound up triumphantly, jerking on the long pepper-and-salt trousers outgrown by her old friend's grandson, and shaking them down with a series of vigorous movements, "Simeone, who sings like a creaking door—then surely I can earn *five* francs, and papa can have all he needs. Give me the coat."

Strutting up and down the shop as she talked, she was a queer enough little figure in the boy's clothes; for being a woman child, she of course swaggered, as every woman

A CHANGE OF SEX

wearing man's garments has swaggered since the world began.

She looked smaller and slighter than usual, and carried her dark head extremely erectly.

"No one will ever know," she declared; "look at the parrots, not one of them recognises me!"

Then suddenly she stopped, her face white with tragedy.

"My hair!" she cried.

"Gid." The old woman raised her hands helplessly. "Of course!"

Then she took from the drawer an ancient astrakhan cap, worn bare in places like a mangy dog.

"Let us try, my dear——"

The long black pigtail pinned on the top of her head, the cap jammed tightly down to the nape of her neck, the danger seemed very well averted.

"No one will know," declared Agnese, "but don't fight and take it off!"

Beechy threw back her head with a jerk, and made a little clucking sound that meant disdain.

"Not I! Well, thank you, Agnese, a million thanks to you. I will go now. Oh, do you know where the theatre is?"

"Yes, just off the Corso, near the via Merulana, near the Church of Santa Lucia. Can you find it?"

Beechy had only once or twice in her life been more than a stone's throw from the Street of the Violin, but in big enterprises the small difficulties contingent on them are easily disregarded.

"Of course I can find it. Good-bye, and once again, a thousand thanks to you."

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF A REHEARSAL

"**I**MBECILES, children of dogs, animals all of you, do you call that singing? Here am I wasting my life, my nerves, my genius, trying to beat into your stupid heads—ah, my God, what a life!"

Maestro Checco Landucci banged his baton down on the music-stool and groaned loudly, while the gentlemen of the chorus stared at him with unmoved and uninterested faces.

The theatre, small and dingy, was dark but for the stage and two boxes, where some friends of some of the artists were sitting chatting.

In the orchestra the various masters, including the master of the drum, wore their hats, and most of them their coats, for the place was cold.

It was a sordid, unbeautiful scene, but such as it was it stamped itself indelibly on Beatrice Cavaleone's mind as she stood, quite unobserved, at the back of the house.

Not knowing where to go, she had managed to slip by an old man who was sweeping the foyer, and found her way in alone.

Small, alert, keen-eyed, she saw it all; the strange effect of the lighted stage in the midst of the darkness; the poorly dressed, huddled chorus people; the prompter half out of his box scolding vigorously; the roughly set scenery, with the long flight of steps at the top of which Micaela, a very small woman in a huge, befeathered hat, stood talking to the baritone.

In the orchestra the patches of white light, against which

THE STORY OF A REHEARSAL

were etched in sharp relief the bored, unshaven faces of the musicians; the half-hysterical director waving his arms furiously. And in the air, sniffed at rapturously by Beechy's small nostrils, the indescribable, intoxicating stage odour that, composed of a hundred different things, is the same in all the theatres of the world.

"Now, then, my children, commence again," went on the director with a sudden change of tone—" '*Sulla piazza si schiamazza* '—try to get it right, or you will break my heart——"

The doleful-looking men, their hands for the most part buried in their pockets, responded without enthusiasm, Morales inspecting his face in a small pocket mirror as he sang.

"Now then, Celli, come on, come on," bawled the director; "and don't fall down again."

"For Charity's sake," began the stage-manager, as the diminutive Micaela started down the steps, but the director waved him into obscurity. "Louder, Signorina, louder, or else make faces, so they can see that you are singing!"

" 'Who? I seek a brigadier,' " piped the girl, her white gloved hands making an ugly spot on her dark skirt as she sawed them up and down.

Morales, wasting not his hour, urged her to await the absent José, but the timid creature refused, flitting deplorably, and skipped coyly away.

Beechy stood transfixed, her head swimming with emotional delight, but her ear pierced by the well-brought-up maiden's final g natural.

Then at last the stage-manager, an Olympian person with a flower in his coat and an endearing manner, waved his hand towards the wings, and out came a stream of little boys marching proudly, piping wildly. " *Uno due, uno due,* " roared the stage-manager. " *Keep time! Look out, or you'll fall down——* "

Down the steps they came, little boys in long trousers, little boys in knickerbockers, little boys in rough capes,

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little boys with mufflers, but all little boys pinched with cold and poverty, and forgetting everything in the truly little-boyian joy of marching to music !

"Stop, stop, stop !"

The baton crashed more loudly than ever on the iron music stand, and the director pulled his black hair into a tall peak that promptly fell over his brow in a manner most artistic.

"*What* are you singing ? What do I hear ? Have you *no* mercy on me ? God forgive you all, you are murdering me !"

"Come, come, Maestro," protested the stage-manager, still marking time in a bewitching way with his patent-leathered feet, "it isn't *that* bad !"

"Dear Thou," retorted the director, more enraged than ever, "it is well known that thou art no artist. If thou wert, thy nerves——"

"In Heaven's name, let's get on," put in unexpectedly a woman's voice. "Your temper is impossible, Landucci."

"Dearest Giacomini, wilt thou have the inexpressible kindness to mind thy own business ? Now then, boys, begin over."

But the boys, while they marched well, could not sing, poor little wretches, for the excellent reasons that the music is written in an almost impossibly high pitch, and that there was not a voice among them.

Suddenly the director flung down his baton, and tearing his hair wildly, turned round and gazed into the empty theatre. "You, Rinaldi," he called, his voice choking with rage, "tell me how can I bear this !"

Rinaldi, one of the men in the box, who was smoking, gave a great laugh. "*Caro Maestro*," he returned, sympathetically, "don't ask me. What you need is *voices*."

Landucci, with a shrug and a huge sigh, was about to turn when he caught sight of a boy standing alone in the dusk.

"A boy !" he cried, "another boy ! Have you a voice ? Do you belong to the chorus ?"

THE STORY OF A REHEARSAL

"All the boys are here, imbecile," bellowed the stage-manager. "Drop your nonsense, Landucci." But to his amazement out of the darkness came a small, clear voice.

"I have a beautiful voice," it said, "and I can sing. How can I get up?"

Signora Giacomini, the Carmen, who was sitting in one corner of the stage sewing, leaned over the footlights.

"This way, little dear," she called. "Give him a lift, one of you *Maestri*."

So thus it was that Beatrice Cavaleone was lifted up to the stage on the occasion of her first appearance, by the master of the trombone.

"Isn't he a dear?" "How pretty!" "What lovely eyes!" To such remarks Beechy's ears were calmly deaf. She had marked the stage-manager for her own, as a person in authority, and went straight to him, her cold little hands in her jacket pockets.

"How do you do?" she began politely. "Will you have them play it over once more? I have heard it before, so once will do——"

Everybody laughed, at which she gave a glance round her.

Landucci, now laughing loudly, raised his baton, and all the little boys began marking time with that unfeigned joy that in every representation of "Carmen" that ever was given has characterised the little boys.

Beechy listened to the music, her brows drawn together, her lower lip thrust out. When the music ceased she nodded to the director. "*Va bene*," she said, and it did go well.

Singing with no words, her high, clear pipe rose like that of a bird well above the feeble shrilling of her companions, and as always happens in chorus-singing, the inefficient singers followed the efficient one, so the result was satisfactory, even to the difficult Landucci.

"Bravo, bravo!"

"What is thy name, Carino?"

"Give me a kiss," suggested Carmen, looking up from her sewing. She did not particularly care to have Beechy

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kiss her, but trusted that her request might annoy the director.

Beechy stood still, smiling to herself, unheeding, because not hearing, the chatter. She had heard the call of 'the theatre.

Then Don José, a pallid youth in a brown bowler, and Morales had their little dialogue, and once more the enraptured, albeit blue with cold, little boys burst out again in a song, and swaggering violently were led up the steps and off to the right.

Carmen, who was pleased with the world because her baby was better, because she herself had just annoyed the director, who was in love with her, and because Micaela had no voice whatsoever, listened to the cigarette-girls' chorus and Landucci's vituperations of these ladies, with much satisfaction. The sordidly dressed, dull-looking women, as much unlike dashing, bewitching cigarette-girls as so many nuns would have been, stood huddled together, their heads wrapped for the most part in knitted scarfs, waving large red hands from time to time, turning bored eyes on the frantic little man with the baton.

He scolded so much and so vehemently that he had lost all effect on them.

" 'O'er our senses,' " the women bleated.

" 'Joy is stealing.' "

Carmen looked up suddenly as a merry bubbling laugh startled her. Beechy stood by her, having come quietly down the steps under the stage-manager's very nose, unseen by that great man.

"One would say, wouldn't one, Signora, that joy was stealing o'er their senses?" exclaimed the child.

Signora Giacomini rose. "You funny little boy! I must go now——"

And off she ran, leaving Beechy alone, but without embarrassment.

While Carmen gave her impressions of love to an uninterested crowd, Beechy sat and studied the scene.

THE STORY OF A REHEARSAL

To him who has not the stage instinct, to whom the very word stage does not bring a kind of secret vibration of soul, the most perfect and modern of theatres can say nothing.

Whereas to him who has the stage instinct, to whom the theatre-magic is a real thing, as real as a vivid dream (and everyone knows that nothing in real life is as vivid as some dreams), the poorest, dirtiest theatre in the world, even a booth pitched at some country fair, contains all the magic, all the wonder, all the queer unrealness that is so much more real than the richest, fullest outside life.

So Beechy had found in the small and miserable theatre the home of her mind.

Someone gave her a bit of chocolate, someone else wrapped round her a dirty pink shawl, for it was growing colder. The Remendado came at length and sat down by the child. He was a tall man with an egg-shaped head and only one little finger.

"You have a good voice, little boy," he said kindly. "Don't ever try to sing loud, or you'll spoil it. I hope," he sighed, "that it may be a tenor. Only tenors count, really."

Beechy nodded. She wished he would go away.

"Who is that man?" she asked, pointing to José.

"*Il tenore*," explained the Remendado with gloom.

The tenor had not much voice, but he sang well. Beechy loved the duet, she loved it all. Perhaps best of all she loved her own little legs in their grey trousers. It was great fun being a boy. It was delightful having one's legs free, having pockets wherein to bury one's cold hands.

She liked it all. The stage-manager came and asked her her name.

"Beechy—" she stammered, terrified.

"Bici, oh!" He wrote it down, thinking it was her surname, and went away, telling her to come again the next day. Time went on and on.

Signora Giacomini, walking through her part, using only a little of her rather worn voice, reached the last act

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in safety, and then suddenly in the scene with the desperate José, broke into real song, real acting. The tenor stared, but took her cue, and as they both knew their parts, the scene rushed on to its frightful ending as if inspired. “

“*Carmen—idè'amo——*”

Down came the knife, down fell the woman, and in the cry of the man and a crash of the music it was over.

“*Brava Giacomini—brava, bravissimi* to you both ! ”

She rose, wiping the dust from her skirt and breathing hard.

“ I didn't mean to do it,” she exclaimed. “ I was a fool to tire myself out so, but—— ”

“ What made you, so suddenly ? ” queried the Dancaire.

For answer she pointed to Beechy, who stood with her two hands clasped hard to her breast.

“ *He* made me,” returned the soprano ; “ just look at his eyes ! ” •

CHAPTER IV

THE JOY OF BEING A BOY

WHEN one has been a member of a distinctly inferior, though in many ways favoured sex, and then by a wave of a wand becomes that king of creation—a Boy, the effect is dazzling.

And if that hypothetical critic, the fly on the wall, had been there to observe the effect on Beechy, of her change of costume, he would, were he an astute fly, have foreseen for her a variety of things not obviously the outcome of her position in life.

Not the mere fact that she walked precisely like a somewhat swaggering boy, and that each of her attitudes was in its essentials, quite ungirlish, but the very expression of her face had changed. Wildly excited by her experiences at the theatre, her original object, money, quite lost in the incidental joys appertaining to it, the child hurried back to her own street, whistling loudly a scrap of the music that was whirling in her brain.

*“Alta là, chi va là
Dragon d’Alcalà—”*

It was nearly dark, and to her the homely poetry of the streets of the poor at the hour when work ceases, and lights are lit, was always to appeal loudly.

Workpeople loitered along, warm red light streamed out into the blackness from opening doors, a cheery smell of frying oil and garlic met her eager little nose from time to time.

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"Alta là, che va là,
Dragon d'Alcalà!"

A slim youth standing with his eyes fixed on an upper window of a well-to-do house not far from the Street of the Violin, turned as the whistler drew near.

"Hello, you—little boy——"

Beechy stopped with an impertinent upward jerk of her chin as foreign to her nature as were the trousers she wore to her legitimate costume. "Want to earn fifty centimes?"

The amount named was staggering, but Beechy nodded hastily. "Yes——"

It was all a part of the wonderful day that a mystery should at that dream-hour project itself into her life. From behind his back the young man produced a bunch of chrysanthemums. "See that window?"

"*Si Signore.*"

"Well, can you read?"

"Of course I can."

"Well, take these flowers up to the third floor, and ring at Dr. Mincotti's door. When the maid opens the door, ask to see the—the Signorina Elvira. Then—give her these."

Beechy nodded eagerly. "*Va bene, va bene.*"

From his pocket the young man took a letter, which he folded very small.

"Can I trust you? Yes, I think I can. See, some day you too will be sending letters to some Signorina——"

Beechy burst out laughing, and the young man drew back angrily.

"Excuse me, sir," she added hastily. "I do understand. I am to take the letter and give it to the Signorina Elvira without anyone else's seeing. Is that right?"

The Italian had nothing but admiration for her ready comprehension!

"Yes; you are a good boy. And—she may give you a letter for me—I will wait here——"

Beechy touched her cap dashingly. "*Va bene.*"

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The stairs were of stone, very cold, and but poorly lighted, but in comparison with the ones the child knew, very grand.

She raced up in one breath, the letter in her trousers pocket, and gave a faint ring at the bell. After a long pause the door opened, and a tidy maidservant with a large wart on her nose appeared.

"I have nothing for you," she snapped, and was about to shut the door when Beechy thrust the flowers nearly into her face. "I want to see the Signorina Elvira, please. These are for her."

"Well, you can't see her, then. I'll take them."

"No. I want to see her myself."

But the maid, with the intimate knowledge of all that concerned her master's family that characterises Italian servants of her class, gave a short laugh.

"Of course they're from the Signor Paolo. Well, you may tell him that the Signor Dottore is not going to let the Signorina Elvira have anything more to do with him, so he may as well take his flowers to someone else."

It was discouraging, but Beechy was fearless, and in a flash saw what her best line of argument was.

A door at the end of the narrow red-tiled passage was open, and beyond it was firelight, a red sofa, a gilded table.

Before the maid could raise a finger Beechy had dashed down the passage and into the gorgeous room where sat a girl of twenty, with a very elaborately dressed head of hair, absently stroking a cat that was sitting on her lap.

"Signora Elvira?"

"Yes."

Before the indignant maid had reached the door the letter was lying between the cat and the girl's lap, and Beechy was holding out the flowers.

"These are for you, Signorina."

"~~Ma Signorina~~ this impertinent little guttersnipe——"

"Go away, Rosa. Get me a penny for him; he has brought some flowers I ordered for papa's birthday."

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Rosa departed, crestfallen, and the ready liar, to whom all Beechy's admiration went out, quite untempered by disapproval, in a gust of enthusiasm, took from her pocket a smooth, pink envelope, and crushed it into the messenger's hand.

"You are a *dear* little boy," she said; "a good little boy. What is your name?"

"Here is the penny, Signorina," interrupted Rosa, returning. "Shall I put the flowers in the Signor Dottore's room? They will be a delightful surprise for him, after your sulking all day with him."

"Hold your tongue, Rosa. Good-bye, *piccino*. I am perfectly satisfied with the flowers."

Beechy raced down the stairs, and gave the letter to the impatient lover, who duly rewarded her with fifty centimes, an extravagantly large sum for so simple an errand, but which, in the expansion of his satisfied heart, he would willingly have increased to a lira.

When his eulogium of Beechy's genius and virtue had ended, he added, "I might need you again. Where can I find you?"

Beechy hesitated, and then, with the confidence of the born persuader that he can persuade away any difficulties that might arise, she answered:

"At Carelli's bird-shop, 22 Via del Violino. Ask for Bici."

The young man made a mental note of the address, and Beechy sped away to persuade Agnese not to betray her.

"Well, and did you sing?" the old woman asked, looking up from the soup she was making over her absurd little stove in her dark living-room.

"Yes, I sang—and there were, oh, *lots* of gentlemen playing instruments, too beautiful. And some of them sang alone, and some together, and one gentleman killed a lady with a long knife."

"Holy Madonna!" The old woman turned, her jaw dropped in horror.

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Beechy laughed merrily. "Not really, you know. In the play. And, only guess, thou! Simeone d'dn't know me, and they all call me a little boy! Also, I earned half a lira carrying some flowers and a letter to a young lady. There was," she added, "a golden table in the room!"

"A golden table!"

"Yes. It was a wonderful *palazzo*."

While she got into her own clothes again her tongue flew on, recounting in detail all the wonders of the Signorina Elvira's *salone*. The room was in reality a very tasteless, gaudy, middle-class Roman sitting-room, and her inexperienced imagination transformed it into a dream of fairyland. But allowing for this, the accuracy with which she described the things she had seen for the first time in her life, and then for at the most four minutes, was remarkable.

"There was a glass box with the loveliest dead birds on a tree; and gold chairs, and a piano, with a carpet on it with ladies dancing in a meadow painted on it—or sewed into it—and looking-glasses with butterflies painted on the frame and one on the glass; and red chairs, and the most beautiful pictures, one of a lake with boats on it, and one of a girl combing her hair in an open window. And the curtains were lace with flowers in the lace, and the lamp had red silk over it, so the light was red. And Miss Elvira was so beautiful, her face *very* white and her hair oiled, and she smelt of vanilla."

"Well, well, well, what a magpie you are, to be sure! Here, have some soup, my dear, and rest your tongue, or it will drop out."

As she ate the very welcome soup Beechy unfolded her scheme, which developed as she unfolded it, of being, in the future, as much as possible a boy.

"You will, I am sure, lend me the clothes, and I will sing every day, and I can earn money. Oh!" suddenly she rose. "God forgive me, I had quite forgotten papa!"

Horried by, but not at all ashamed of, this fact, she

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embraced old Agnese, unpinned her pigtail, and scampered up the street homewards.

The great room was quite dark, and the sick man asleep. Signora Marianna had gone home. Silently, moving with the stillness characteristic of her, Beechy lighted the lamp, blew the dying coals in the brazier into a comfortable glow, and made her humble preparations for supper.

When her father at last awoke she was sitting curled up in his big chair, sound asleep, the grey kitten in her arms.

CHAPTER V

AT THE "TWO QUEENS"

M AESTRO LANDUCCI, the terror of the artists, the most honest of men, yet lived a double life. This has happened before and to many people; for after all men are the playthings of circumstance, and circumstance was too much for Landucci, as it has often been for his betters. Sensitive tenors and mezzo-soprani trembled under the lash of his meridional tongue (baritones and soprani are of sterner stuff, for soprani are hard to find, and fully appreciate and even misuse their power; whereas tenors having always much of the woman about them, are things of nerves and moods, and so thin in the skin).

Thus, at the Leopardi, Landucci's power of invective made him a creature to be disliked, if not feared; but at home—at the Hotel delle Due Regine, near the Pantheon, for the director was a Calabrian, and so was Landucci—things were different. For Signora Landucci was to her husband in the matter of temper, and what the simple cockney simply calls "language," as wine to water, as a blazing tropic sun to the languid northern moon.

Signora Landucci was a small, dark woman, in looks what the Italians call "dry," and she had a heavy moustache.

She was blessed with unfailing appetites for food and for gossip, with a thousand lire a year of her very own (a tremendous power against her poverty-stricken husband), and against him, too, she held the strongest of weapons, the fact that in marrying him she had married beneath her.

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Her father had had a small hotel in Pontesuaggio, a town built on a promontory overhanging the sea near Reggio in Calabria.

Whereas Landucci's father had been a mere railway-porter, and Landucci, although an artist—elastic word in dear Italy—was also a pauper. A more miserable man than the present director of the orchestra of the Teatro Leopardi never lived.

About a week after Beechy's unceremonious début into theatrical life, Landucci went home to the Inn of the Two Queens after the last rehearsal. He was tired, but rather pleased with himself, for he had won hands down in a battle with the tenor, who had insisted on singing the "Romance of the Flower" much slower than it had ever been sung before, and when Landucci had broken his baton, in a fit of rage, the stage-manager had taken his side, routed the tenor, and at the same time begged Landucci for his own sake to try to control his terrible temper.

This, to the henpecked husband, was as balm on a raw wound, as many will understand. So, although the Tramontana was blowing germ-laden dust fiercely through the stony streets, and though his head ached, Landucci was fairly happy as he made his way past the Pantheon and up the narrow lane that led to his hotel.

Italian life is so much written about and so curiously poeticised and de-poeticised by the writers that one sometimes wonders that no one protests. Mr. Stopford and Mr. Willoughby both poeticise, but Mr. Stopford's keen sense of humour, as well as the intelligent experience of many years, saves him from misunderstanding this delightful race.

Mr. Willoughby's Italians are charming, and human, and beautifully explained, but they are simply people, not essentially Italians, and possibly this is because Mr. Willoughby himself is essentially English. Easier, perhaps, for the camel to pass through the needle's eye than for a full-blooded Briton to really understand full-blooded Italians.

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The two races reason from quite opposed standpoints, and, miracle of miracles, such a thing as an Italian snob does not exist.

This last, of course, means that the difference between the Italian aristocrat and the Italian peasant is infinitely less than that between the English aristocrat and the English peasant.

The Italian ploughboy will greet you with a great courtesy or as great intentional rudeness, as will the Italian nobleman. Shy uncouthness is unknown in the peninsula—as unknown as abstract Horror of a Lie.

There are, to Italians, two kinds of lies. Bad lies and good lies. And good men tell only good lies. That is all, and it is simple.

As to women—ask your most cherished, your most cultivated and cosmopolitan Italian friend, about truth-telling women. His answer, or his shrug, will be illuminating to you.

So in describing the Landucci *ménage*, up three pairs of dark stairs at the "Two Queens," I am describing any unevenly matched Italian couple. And this, in spite of the well-known fact that no Italian is content to be an Italian; he is a Roman, or a Torinese, or a Neapolitan—as the case may be, right through the scale, down to the peasant who, having no town to claim, claims his province.

And if this is so to-day, how much more was it so in the days of which I write, when Italy as a kingdom had existed for only a few years.

Maestro Landucci, his high coat collar pulled well up round his ears against the piercing wind, hurried through the streets thinking of his dinner, for he was hungry, and had worked hard all day.

Dinner and bed were good things to be counted on, and it might be, as well, that Luisa's temper would be at its best. "Hope dies hard."

The "Two Queens" is a very old hostelry situated in a courtyard. On the ground floor are three large rooms de-

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voted to the restaurant service, high-frescoed, dingy rooms, packed with small tables and shiny wooden chairs. Upstairs is the hotel itself, a congeries of tortuous passages and rooms of all shapes and sizes, for the "Two Queens" has two entrances, and has gradually come to comprise three old palaces.

The Signora Campi, the proprietress, a monstrously fat old woman with several velvety-brown moles on her silky pink face, looked up from her chair in the bureau as Landucci passed.

"Good evening, Maestro."

"Good evening, Signora. My wife——?"

"The Signora is upstairs. And the opera, how goes it?"

Landucci unbuttoned his shabby coat as he answered with despairing eyes, "Dear You" (this does not by any means signify "You dear"), "what is one to do with a band of imbeciles—of born idiots? They prance and make grimaces, but sing? *Madonna Santa*, who could sing without a voice, I ask you?"

"The Giacomini's not so bad," criticised the old woman shrewdly.

"No. But her day was fifteen years ago; and the tenor, if he ever has a day, will have it when ten more years have passed. He is a baby, a green boy. And even with double soles and high heels he reaches only to the lobe of her ear."

"Such is life, *Maestro mio*! By the way, a little boy has been here this evening asking for you; it is over an hour now since he left."

Landucci pondered.

"A little boy? Who was he?"

"I don't know. He came and waited some time, but he would not tell his name. A slight boy with blue eyes and—something very well-educated and refined about him."

"Well dressed?"

"*Macchè*, no! Poor clothes, grey—and a fur cap—but for all that, you know, something very gentlemanly——"

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The director's face lighted up. "I have it! It must be little Bici. A boy who is in the chorus. His father has been very ill, and for two days he has not come. I wish I had seen him——"

As he spoke the door opened, and several men, habitués of the restaurant, came in, and he went on upstairs.

Signora Luisa was waiting for him in the small room that poverty of languages compelled the poor man to call by the beautiful name of home.

Signora Luisa was high-busted and small-waisted; her sharp nose was red at the point, her thin lips were pale and set. A shrew, plainly labelled as such.

But in garb she was rather gorgeous, for her red blouse was of papery satin, and her hat was covered with feathers of the same hue.

Most women have, if no really good qualities, at least some useful small charms. A dimple, a pretty ankle, has kept men from utter despair.

But Signora Luisa had no small charms, and as her spirit was low and her temper high, she was very dreadful as a wife.

Landucci spoke to her softly, as was his way, and, as was hers, she stormed at him for being late, for looking tired, for being himself and not someone, anyone, else.

He combed his tossed hair, and washed his hands, and then they went down to dinner.

At a small table in the corner of the middle room they ate. First raw ham and salami smelling of garlic. Then a mixed fry, bits of liver and tripe, bits of brains, bits of artichoke, all fried in oil.

Then after a short, sharp dispute, they ate roast veal and spinach. The meal was ending more or less peaceably with hot custard in coffee cups, when Beechy came in, and after one of the rapid, comprehensive glances characteristic of her, made straight for their table.

"Oh, Maestro," she began, plunging at once into the matter of her coming, "my father is dead!"

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Signora Luisa drew herself up in a way meant to express fastidious horror of the public mention of death.

"Thy father"—stammered Landucci.

"Yes. And—he told me to go to the Commendatore, and—I don't know the Commendatore's name."

Landucci looked nervously at his wife.

"Well, well, I am very sorry for you, Bici, *Poverino!* But you see, my Signora and I are—we are dining."

He was not an unkind man, but the woman had made a coward of him.

Beechy stared. "Dining—I have had no food since last night," she said with a short laugh. Then she sat down, and breaking a great bit off the long brown loaf, began to eat.

Her face was very white and her eyes swollen. She had, obviously, cried all her tears. She loved her father, and he was dead.

But she herself was alive, and hungry, and although she did not know it, she was an artist, and to artists more than to other people, even, is self-preservation the first law of nature.

She had formulated no theories on the subject, but subconsciously the clearest fact in the universe was, to her, the fact of her own small, adrift, hungry, helpless personality.

And with a shrewdness beyond her years she had seized the fact that the irascible director was, of all the people at the theatre, the one most likely to be kind to her.

"I got your address from the Hunchback," she explained, "and I came this afternoon, but you were out."

"*What do you want?*"

The words, the first she had heard Signora Luisa utter, fell on her ear like something cold.

"What do I want?" For a second the child studied the woman's face, and then with something like the ghost of a twinkle of amusement in her own, she answered innocently, "Some thick soup, please, and then—some meat."

Two men at the next table burst out laughing, and Signora Luisa's thin lips narrowed to vanishing point.

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"Come, Checco," she said, rising suddenly, "I don't want any coffee. We will go upstairs."

But Landucci drew a long breath and sat still. "I—I will come up immediately, my treasure," he answered. "First I will give Bici something—a little—to eat. He—has just lost his father, poor little fellow."

"Bravo," murmured one of the listening men.

Signora Luisa turned to him. "Bravo *Lei*," she snapped, "badly educated one."

After which extremely insulting remark she left the room.

"Oh, my God, my God!" poor Landucci leaned his tired head on his hand for a second. "Oh, my God!"

Bici frowned, because she did not understand. Then as comprehension came to her she observed sententiously, "A bad wife is worse in the house than a serpent. Why don't you beat her?"

"Oh, hush! You are a naughty boy," protested the horrified director. "Luisa is *not* a bad wife, and—men don't beat women."

"*H'm!*" returned Beechy, catching the eye of the badly educated man, who was drinking black wine.

The man burst out laughing, and Landucci banged his hand down on the table.

The man's laughter went as suddenly as it had come.

"You are a very naughty boy," Landucci repeated; "and if your father were not dead—a *very* naughty boy!"

Beechy's eyes filled again with tears. Her father had been to her, not a father, but a friend and a splendid house-decoration. But she had loved him, and now she was ashamed of having for a moment quite forgotten him.

"*Cameriere!* Waiter! Bring this boy some food at once, some veal and potatoes. Now, Bici, drink some wine and water."

Beechy obeyed, and let her tears dry on her lashes, rather than publicly remove them.

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"Take off your hat," suggested Landucci.

"No, thank you, Maestro."

After a pause she went on: "They buried him to-day. And—it is so cold," she shuddered.

"He doesn't feel the cold, my dear. He is in Paradise."

Orthodox Catholic children are duly instructed in the theory of Purgatory and Paradise, but it may be observed that when one of its own family dies, the child is invariably told that that particular soul has gone straight to Paradise.

Beechy, however, had a touch of reasoning.

"He was very good, my father," she remarked, attacking her veal more wolfishly than was quite beautiful. "Very good. Also he was a gentleman. But no doubt he had some small sins on his soul. Father Amedeo says everyone has, except the blessed saints, so I fear he is in Purgatory *now*, just for a little while."

Landucci started.

"What an extraordinary little boy you are!"

In vino veritas.

The wine and water had increased in the child a delicious belief in the kindness of everyone, while Landucci, giver of veal and potatoes, appeared to her a philanthropist worthy of any confidences.

"I am not an extraordinary little boy," she whispered, leaning towards him, her glass to her lips.

"You are not a—why aren't you? What do you mean?" he answered.

She drank slowly, her lucent eyes fixed on his.

"Because," she said, "I am—an extraordinary little girl."

CHAPTER VI

THE EMPTY CRADLE

THERE are those who complain that Rome is no longer Rome, that the new, stucco, be-villa'd quarter has ruined it; that the horrors of busy streets like the Via Nazionale have destroyed the charm of the lovely place.

These disgusted spirits, like most other people in the long run, get what they deserve. For if beauty, a more or less tangible thing, existent at least to a great degree under certain fixed laws, is in the eye of the beholder, how much more is the essence, the charm, of a great city? Rome, the Rome of modern life and politics, the Rome who does not scruple to use the base of her ancient columns as a hoarding for electioneering bills bidding "Romans, elect Giuseppe Ruffo, the Socialist candidate," the Rome of ugly villas and busy thoroughfares, of trams and electricity, of vacuum cleaners, and motors, and steeplechases is, for a' that, still Rome. For no city worth loving at all is made by external things. To the lover of cities, each one has its own atmosphere, what may be called its psychic smell. And of all cities in the world, this holds good of Rome.

There is an early morning hour when the streets round Trajan's forum are busy only with the humble people who live there, when housewives are buying their stores for the day, when smooth-cheeked, serious men on their way to business, pause and exchange the usual morning compliments; when quiet and sunlight lie on the little enclosure whose great past is part of the world, when the broken shafts and the mysterious piles of stone seem to brood

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unresentfully on what has been; when the observant lover of the spirit of Rome, if he understands Italian, and if he is not aggressively a foreigner, will, walking bookless about the ancient quarter, and if his imagination is in good working order, find himself back in the years himself a Roman, understanding the Roman mind, feeling in his breast a Roman heart. These moments do not last; they are as fleeting as they are wonderful; rainbows across the dulness of ordinary hours.

They are rare, for they are not waking dreams, they are inspirations—flashes from the sleeping years—for years do not die, any more than souls do—and they cannot be explained; they can only be felt.

But to those who have felt them the cry "Rome is no longer Rome" is the chattering of malicious monkeys, the plaint of a man at the Aquarium, who with his silly nose glued to the glass behind which the fish swim, declares that there is no water because he, forsooth, remains dry!

Peace to their ashes, for so far as Rome is concerned they are dead.

Rome, with all her ruins, all her history, is alive and will live, and why anyone should wish her to have remained, early Victorian, a kind of picnic ground for the romantic traveller, is incomprehensible, and argues no more than narrow-heartedness on the part of him who so wishes.

So even to-day, I maintain, those who deserve it find the Dream-Rome that is the Real Rome, and those who deserve an inferior Chicago or Liverpool, will find even that in the city of the Cæsars.

So Rome endures.

In Beatrice Cavaleone's childhood the kingdom was a new kingdom, Garibaldi's work was but newly accomplished, the gallant King, the liest and most charming of men, was but recently dead, there was no Via Nazionale, no electric trams, and the railway was a thing still new enough to be talked about. But the real Rome was exactly what it is to-day.

THE EMPTY CRADLE

For the first three years after her father's death the child lived at the "Two Queens."

That evening, in the restaurant, when she told the amazed Landucci that she was a girl, he had been frightened to the verge of terror. What in Heaven's name was he to do with a girl child of eleven? He, most downtrodden of penniless men? Yet Beechy had come to stay. She was alive, therefore she must live, and someone must provide for her. This was her own idea, elucidated with the greatest clearness and with characteristic lack of embarrassment.

"I like you," she concluded.

"My Signora—" began the unhappy little man, his pale face furrowed with anxiety, but Beechy laughed.

"Oh, I don't like her," she said consolingly; "I shan't bother her." Inferring that those she liked she would naturally lean on. It was one of the small points that marked her for the artist.

Landucci gave his head a great shake that brought rank locks over his brow in a way he liked.

"I am poor," he avowed.

"Oh, that, of course. That doesn't matter. I shall stay at the theatre. I am going to be a great singer." Then she dipped a hunch of grey bread into her wine and water, and tore at it with the frank delight of a dog over a particularly succulent bone.

Landucci never forgot the scene. The now nearly empty room, faintly lighted by bad-smelling lamps, the heaviness of cooking in the air, the weary, unshaved waiter with a dirty napkin over his arm. And the little bright-eyed boy-girl devouring mulberry-coloured, dripping bread as she unfolded to him her perfectly simple scheme of life.

"Will they let me stay on in the boys' chorus if they know I'm a girl?"

"I—I don't know——"

"Then we had better not tell them." *We!*

THE LORDSHIP OF LOVE

"But, my dear, I have no house, no room for you. Have you no friend with whom you could live?"

"Only Signora Marianna, the *trattorista's* widow, and she has dozens of children. Oh, no, I will come here. I'll work, you know."

"There isn't any work," protested the poor director faintly, but it was all in vain.

Beechy meant to come and live at the "Two Queens," and she came.

Fat Signora Campi, the *padrona*, kindest of women, listened sympathetically to Landucci's tale, and found for the child a wee room up close under the roof, a room shaped rather like a flat-iron, owing to the encroachments of other rooms. There was in the flat-iron a small iron bedstead, a chair that had once had a cane-bottom, a rusty tin washing-stand in which stood a broken basin, and an old-fashioned cradle, a brown carved cradle on rockers, put up in this uninhabited corner of the old inn to be out of the way.

Signora Campi wiped her eyes as she looked at this last bit of furniture.

"My dear," she said, "all my babies were rocked in that cradle; seven. And they are all dead."

Beechy, delighted and happy (but not in the least consciously grateful) in the possession of her new home, put her foot on one of the rockers, and the cradle began to rock.

"*Madonna mia, Madonna mia!*" cried the old woman, clasping her beringed hands, "to think that they are all gone, my little beautiful babies."

Three of them had lived to marry, and one, the one who had been the most beautiful of all to the mother, had been shot for selling information to the Austrians, but—to her heart, as she watched the slowly ceasing movement of the cradle, they were little babies still.

For mothers do not change, any more than Rome changes. They grow old, fat, thin, disagreeable, even wicked, as the

THE EMPTY CRADLE

case may be, but put them in front of the cradle or bed that used to hold their babies, and watch their eyes !

Beechy, when she was alone, suddenly remembered her father, and cried desperately for an hour. All her life she remembered with tenderness the kind, gentle-voiced man in his arm-chair. It was not her nature to forget, but (and this faculty of artistic people is often misunderstood) her mind never lingered long in the past.

So after a torrent of hot tears the child blew her little nose in her little handkerchief, and went to sleep in a kind of comfortable whirl of excitement. To-morrow was coming, and what might it not hold ? . . .

There was a moon that night, a warm, mellow moon away from which the black tramontana had blown all the clouds. A moon who looked down and saw, probably, much what she had seen in the days when her light fell on Nero's Rome. Human ambitions, passions, ideals, as she had seen them then. Poor old moon, are you ever bored by our exact and commonplace likeness to those who have gone on ahead ?

And as long since, the moon had looked in at the sleeping face of some youthful Vestal Virgin, so that night she gazed at Beechy, as the child slept, her soft, brown cheek pillowed on her right arm—a trick she never lost.

Beechy slept well; for she had not slept much of late ; she had cried herself to the stage of exhaustion, and her little stomach was fuller of good food than it had ever been.

But at length she stirred, turned, smiled, and opened her eyes. And her eyes fell on the little old brown cradle, as it stood by the window.

"*Povera culla,*" said Beechy, sitting up in bed, "are you lonely ?"

Answering to the vibration caused by the passing in the narrow street below of some heavy wagon, the cradle stirred slightly, as if a ghost hand had touched it.

Beechy's eyes widened. "Poor cradle," she repeated.

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Then, springing out of bed, she took her little jacket, rolled it up in a long roll, and laid it in the cradle.

"There's a baby for you," she said.

Then she went to sleep again to dream that she was rocking the next youngest of Signora Marianna's children, and singing to it.

CHAPTER VII

ONE WAY TO FACE THE WORLD

THE rehearsals for "Carmen"—then, mind you, a new opera—went on regularly, and in their small way most of the artists were good.

They had not great voices, but having a voice never yet made an artist, and being nearly voiceless never yet prevented a man's or a woman's being an artist.

Giacomini was a very good actress indeed, and managed what remained of a very fine mezzo-soprano with considerable skill. The most fiery of wantons on the stage, she was at home a devoted wife and mother, the laziest, most placid, sweet-natured friend. This, although Giacomini's affection for his wife was known to be a thing of the past.

Landucci had been in love with Angela Giacomini for the past two years, and although he knew she loved her husband and that she was thoroughly indifferent to the tenor, he felt no jealousy whatever for the husband, and writhed and sweated with anguish while she coquetted with Don José.

Every performance was thus a torture to the man, and caused him literally to waste away. When the cigarette-girl sat on the tenor's knee (in reality on the chair, for she was heavy) and made love to him, Landucci's staring white face was horrible to see. Beechy, sitting with her confrères in the gallery at Lillas Pastia's, soon noticed this phenomenon, though she was too young to understand the reason for it.

She also observed that when, in the third act, Carmen turns towards Escamillo, Landucci's heckling of the tenor

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ceased as by magic, and the baritone became at once the object of his bitter invective.

Carmen, herself, of course realised the situation perfectly, and, equally of course, it amused her. The tenor, a stupid youth, never could make out why the director was so savage with him, during the first acts, so gentle afterwards. "I sing the last act worst of all, too," he would add, "the *tempo* is so devilish."

Poor Landucci, it was balm to him to see the haggard, weebegone José spurned by the little, unspeakable, high-heeled person with the mantilla.

But, oh, how he loathed the Toreador, all red and white, all swagger and seduction!

And Beechy, still known at the theatre as a boy, watched with innocent, shrewd eyes, and wondered. Three days after she had taken up her abode at the "Two Queens," the child might have been seen making her way Tiberwards at about four o'clock in the afternoon.

It was a sunless, cheerless, colourless day, one of those days when all the atmosphere seems to have been absorbed by the dull stones of the city, when mystery has withdrawn from Rome, history sleeps, and even poetry is mute. Tramontana, in other words. Beechy hurried along, her hands buried deep in her breeches pockets, her cap jammed down hard over her brows.

It was a day that gave her misery, as she put it. And she was bent on a sad errand.

Her father's few bits of furniture were that day to be sold, and she was going for the last time to the great room where she had been born, and that had been her home all her life.

She felt small, unwanted, like a stray dog. The streets were full of busy, happy, unkind people, all of whom were members of a family. Only she, Beechy, was alone.

She was utterly miserable, with that miserable misery that comes from the soul, from within, not from external circumstances.

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When she came to the corner of the Lane of Jesus Christ, and turned into the Street of the Violin, she stood still, her hands, blue with cold, clasped against her breast.

Home! Light, food, friends, mirth, and nonsense. Here were all the good things of life.

Gone the misery, gone the very cold!

Walking as if there were springs in her feet, even dancing a little, her face ever and again breaking into a smile, she hurried to old Agnese's. An oil lamp burned already in the little room beyond the piled-up cages, and the old woman sat by it, holding a large green parrot in one hand, while she vainly tried to clip one of its struggling, flapping wings.

"Oh, Signor' Agnese," cried Beechy, throwing her arms around her friend's wrinkled neck, "the saints bless you. I *am* so glad to see you."

She caught the parrot's wing deftly, and knelt down. "I'll hold him. Be quiet, you devil! Oh, isn't he strong? Well, tell me, how are you?"

"And how are they—all? Signora Marianna, and old Lamberti, and Peppina, and Luisina——"

Agnese, who had at length succeeded in clipping the wing of the adventurous-minded parrot, rose, and shut the bird away in his cage.

"*Chè!* So you remember us after all?" she asked.

Beechy stared.

"Remember you? What do you mean? Why shouldn't I remember you?"

The lamp threw a wavering, exaggerated shadow of the old woman's beaked profile on the wall as she came back.

"To go away like that, and not come back!" she grumbled.

Beechy burst out laughing. "You look just like a cross old parrot yourself, on the wall! But—not come back?" with an expressive throwing out and up of her hands.

"Am I not here?"

"It's four days."

THE LORDSIMP OF LOVE

The child reflected for a moment and then shrugged her shoulders. "What are four days?" After a pause she added with a little puzzled frown, "What *does* it matter, now that I am here?" And this was her instinctive attitude towards life.

The fussing, the small hurts, the little jealousies and narrow acquisitiveness of the greater part of humanity, she never, as she always expressed it, arrived to understand.

It was not that she would not; she simply could not. If she was busy for six weeks, busy with work or with amusement, she could not write letters, and when her subsequent greetings, personal or epistolary, were met with reproaches for past neglect, her cry was always, "What does that matter, when I am here now?"

Old Agnese's attitude was that of most people.

"You might have let us know; you might have come sooner. How did we know that you were safe?"

And Beechy, bored, but struggling for patience, "You ought to know that I am *always* all right."

After a time the old woman's wounded feelings were soothed, and she and Beechy set out for the Palazzo Vincenzini, the child attired in the clothes of her own sex.

The humble sale was going on when they arrived. The bed had already gone to a Jew, the old easy chair was being bidden for.

Beechy stood by the door, an unexplained, unexpected feeling of anger tearing at her. These things were hers. How dared people sell her things?

Signor Antonetti, Simeone's father, crossed the room and spoke to her.

"We got a good price for the bed," he said, "and the chair——"

Beechy stamped her foot sharply. "The chair is mine. I won't have it sold."

"But——"

"I won't have it sold."

Marianna, carrying two children, the elder of whom was

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stirring up civil strife by trying to put his finger into the eye of his cadet, came up and tried to explain. "But, carina, Bice dear, you have no money, you know, and the chair will bring——"

"I won't have it sold."

The corners of her mouth were deep-set with obstinacy, her brows drawn together.

"Thinorina," lisped the Jew, "I will give you ten francs for the chair——"

"No, and no, and *no*! It is my chair, and *I will not sell it!*"

She was now in a towering rage, the small creature, and unreasonable and silly though the rage was, its effects were fine. Her cheeks were deep red and velvety, her eyes as black as brimming inkwells, her round chin pointed up defiantly at these grown people who were boring her to death by forcing her into speeches where a word should have sufficed.

"*No!* And—*basta*, enough."

- Then she sat down in the chair and crossed her ankles and her arms and was silent. Nobody laughed.

Half an hour later everyone had gone but old Agnese. The bed, too, had gone, the tables—everything but the easy chair in which the child still sat.

"What will you do with it?"

Old Agnese's voice startled the silence and woke an echo which had crept into the emptiness.

"Keep it. Always. My father always sat in it."

"Yes, but now? You have nowhere to keep it, and it is too big for me or Marianna to have room for it.

"I have fifty-seven francs. And I have a room in a hotel. And I am earning money."

The old woman was silent. Then Beechy said, "Would you mind going home, Signora Agnese? I will come—in a little while."

Grumbling, the old woman went stumblingly down the sharp-echoing stairs.

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Beechy sat quite still. She was not sad. She was too busy with the dramatic quality of the situation to be actively sad. Here was she, Beatrice Cavaleone, aged eleven, alone in the world, leaving for ever the home that had been hers since she was born—over there in the dark corner the big bed had stood.

And she had fifty-seven francs—a huge fortune. And—she was an opera-singer.

The world was at her feet. Hers!

And the world was full of almost unbearably beautiful things.

Presently she found that the corner where the big bed had stood was no darker than the rest of the room.

Night had come.

Through the delicately curved arches of the little loggia the stars twinkled. The moon had gone. Beechy went out and stood leaning where, if the legend is true, the cripple had learned to listen to the merry voice of Raphael that night long ago. Beechy thought of the story.

Like all Romans, she was proud of Raphael, as if he had been a Roman himself.

"Some day," she said, "I will go and see his pictures. I will go to the Vaticano. I will also see the Holy Father, like Benedetto. And the King, I will see him."

Leaning over the parapet, looking down at the velvety, light-streaked and -spotted street, she shivered with delight.

The world was there, and it was hers.

CHAPTER VIII

PROMOTION

BEECHY, at this time of her life, rose early, at about six. This not because she liked it, for she loved her bed, and the last snuggling nap after getting-up-time was as dear to her as it is to most other people.

She got up because she was, as well as an opera-singer, a newsboy. Day after day, all that winter, she crept downstairs, out into the dull dawn, and shivering, made her way to the office of the biggest morning paper of the day.

There she waited with a crowd of boys until the papers were distributed, and away she ran, her damp bundle under her arm.

By this time hunger would not be denied, so back she raced to the "Two Queens," where one of her intimate friends, a sub-pastry-cook, would give her a large cup like an Oriental bath-tub, of *café au lait*, sweetened with coarse, brownish sugar, and as much of yesterday's bread as she could eat.

And she could eat a good deal, our opera-singer.

The kitchen was pleasantly warm, and Ercole, the sub-pastry-cook, as pleasantly cheery and easy-tempered.

Her breakfast eaten, she refolded the newspaper that Ercole in return for his kindness was permitted to read, and then for three hours the child roamed the streets of Rome, bawling out her wares, cheeking people, producing coppers in change from her pockets in a boyish way that by this time was second nature to her. And she was not in the least to be pitied. It was fun rushing about the streets, it was a marvellous, glorious spree, being a boy.

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Later, as she looked back at this period, Beechy could not recall any conscious realisation that she was not a real boy. Her travesty, of course, brought in its way many amusing incidents, many laughs to herself, but as a whole the child felt, as she looked, a small male street urchin.

Her language was vile when necessary, rough and cheerfully profane at all times, and she could never recall having felt any shame therefor.

One day in a quarrel a big boy pulled off her cap. Before he had noticed her tightly twisted pigtail she had seized her cap and fled out of the dark courtyard, leaving her papers behind her. She had juggled with Fate, and now, suddenly, she saw her danger.

Back to the Via del Violino she ran, and into old Agnese's shop.

"Agnese," she cried, panting for breath, "you must cut off my hair ! "

And the old woman, lamenting loudly, obeyed her.

"Don't cry," Beechy said roughly ; " it's my hair, and I love it—but it's the only thing to be done." Her decision was late, but it came irrevocably. An hour later, pigtailless, she sprang upon her late enemy from behind, and gave him a thorough beating.

Through this feat her prestige was assured, and her battles few, for she could now, as the conqueror of Il Rosso, refuse without loss of honour to engage in other battles.

The winter dragged by, hastened by, melted away, according to the mental states of those who underwent it.

The opera was in its way a success, it was played for six weeks, then gave place to another, in which there were not only no little boys, but also no little girls. Apparently the operatic career was closed to Beechy. Remained, however, her branch of journalism, and there were, some years later, many men who publicly boasted of having bought papers of her during that phase of her queer childhood.

Her fortune, her fifty-seven francs, had gone the way of

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other inherited fortunes, and kind Signora Campi had no scruple about taking the newspaper money in return for the bread and lodging of her busy little protégée.

"The room, one understands, I do not need, and he is welcome to it, but his food ! Holy saints, but he eats, the boy, he eats like a grown man ; he is always hungry, and when he is no longer hungry, then still he is always ready for more."

Under the generous régime of the "Two Queens," fish fried in oil, macaroni and its like, oil-soaked salads and vegetables, the child grew strong and sturdy, and her quick mind never had a chance to outweary her lengthening body. Many people go through life hampered by some delicacy or weakness acquired through a lack of proper food in their childhood.

Although no longer in actual fief to the Leopardi, Beechy had acquired a certain position among the kind-hearted artists, and nearly every day the old hunchbacked stage-doorkeeper let her in with the smile that most people have for pleasant children. The old man had a weakness for Greek olives ; the wizened, wrinkled, dark green salt things that are sold in grocers' shops out of huge jars, and very often indeed the child brought him some wrapped in brine-soaked grey paper.

In return he used to give her triangles of dingy, delicious chestnut paste, so they were good friends.

No one but Landucci knew that *il piccolo* Bici was a girl, and to Landucci it was a guilty secret that he tried to forget.

For his Signora hated the child, and would not allow the poor man to speak to her, for Beechy had made people laugh at the woman that first evening in the restaurant, and moreover Beechy had shown too plainly that she liked the director.

Everyone else, from the soprano down to the scene-shifters, called her *piccolo* Bici, and, as I have said before, the child herself could not recall in later years that she

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was conscious of deception in the matter. It was not only romantic and delightful to be a boy, it was also useful in every way, and a wonderful simplifier of life. So she was a boy. That was all.

Lent came early that year, and at *mi-carême* "Carmen" was revived.

Beechy was delighted. Before the first rehearsal she had her rapidly growing black hair cropped afresh, and persuaded Signora Agnese to give her another suit of clothes. This time the trousers were short—dark blue, and the jacket was a sailor jacket, with a broad collar. When she came running in at the last moment, out of breath and rosy, Giacomini caught her, and gave her a resounding kiss on each cheek.

"Look at the dear little legs," the soprano cried, "the sweet little calves to them, and the ankles! What a pity you are not a girl, and you could be a page in——"

Beechy stuck out her lip. "Aren't pages boys?"

"They are supposed to be, but they are always girls dressed up."

They all wondered why the handsome little fellow burst out laughing.

When the rehearsal was over, Beechy, as was her custom, walked as far as the Pantheon with Landucci.

He was visibly disturbed, his black moustache looking like an ebony bar against the pallor of his face.

"It's Carmen that makes you suffer," remarked Beechy.

He started. "Carmen—you're mad! Signora Giac——"

Beechy cut him short. "Of course I don't mean her, I mean—just the whole opera—I remember in the early winter you looked—as you do now."

Landucci sighed with melancholy vanity. His passion was sincere, his pain so great that he was nearly mad, but at the same time he could not, being a man of the theatre, help enjoying the way he looked his part.

But he had a new trouble now, and Beechy hit on it as they hurried on through the cheerful streets.

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"The new tenor," she observed with an air of fine criticism, "pleases me."

"Pleases you!"

"Yes. He has a good voice, and—he is good-looking."

Landucci caught her arm suddenly in a grip that hurt. "Is that what women call good-looking? Confectioners' pink sugar and spun-sugar hair?"

"*Aiè*, you *hurt* me! And I am not a woman, so how do I know? Me, he pleases."

Landucci gave a short laugh. "I didn't mean to hurt you, *poveretto*," he said, "and I suppose you are right; he is good-looking. And he has a coat with silk braid all round the edges. The uniform," he added with a sudden incongruous chuckle, "will be too small for him!"

Beechy thought no more of the conversation, and a few days later she met with a rise in the world. Among the women who sang in the chorus of gipsies was one Violetta Urbani, who took the high notes. She had no middle register, but somewhere in her long throat she had a most useful little set of piercing shrieks tuned to the notes of from *a* to *c* in alt.

And the *Mercédès* being extremely bad, this woman Violetta used always to stand close behind her to supplement her faded high notes. In the fortune-telling duet Violetta stood looking over *Mercédès*' shoulder, weaving her voice with some skill into the other woman's.

So Violetta was useful, and when she fell ill and could not come, the stage-manager tore his hair (literally and dramatically), and did not think he could bear it.

"The only flat in the whole chorus," he stormed, "and no time to try for a new one."

Signora Giacomini, who was sitting sewing a button on the dashing *Moralès*' uniform, looked up quickly. "There's little Bici," she suggested.

"A boy!" muttered the stage-manager scornfully.

"Why not? Girls dress as boys, and even grown women as men. He is as tall as lots of the chorus ladies, and as

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pretty as any girl you ever saw. With a wig—little Bici, come here."

Beechy, who had been doing an errand for the Dançaïre, ran across the stage. "Signora ?"

"Could you sing Urbani's part ?"

Beechy nodded. "With Mercédès ? Yes, I think so. Why ?"

"Because she's ill, and Mercédès—well, you know. Do you think you could walk with a skirt ?"

Beechy, who had a deep-seated sense of humour, caught Landucci's eye.

"I—could try. But my hair—" she suggested innocently.

"Come here and try," interrupted the stage-manager suddenly. "It's worth trying. When the devil is hungry he eats flies. Number 15, Maestro——"

The orchestra struck up, and the card duet began.

"Là-là, là, là," sang Beechy, wordless, but perfect as to tone, the high notes piercingly sweet, the *tempo* perfect.

They then went back to the quintet in the second act, and here through some trick of memory Beechy knew the words too. They struck her as, in the circumstances, very amusing.

When they stopped singing, Mercédès, a pretty woman with bad teeth, put her arm round her coadjutor.

"That's perfect," she said heartily, "far better than Urbani, who splits my ears. May I keep her, Signor ? I will dress her myself if you will send me a wig——"

And thus it was settled, and thus, the evening of *mi-carême* of that year, Beechy—a girl disguised as a boy disguised as a girl, made her debut in the rôle of Mercédès.

The words she learned in two days, Landucci, whose wife believed him to be out, sitting in her little room with her by the light—oh, luxury, oh, wicked extravagance!—of two candles.

Her memory was quick and acute, and her musical ear extraordinary. Indeed, throughout her career she owed less to her voice than to her other gifts.

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Landucci was goodness itself to her, and found much comfort in her innocent society. The man was literally torn to pieces by his love for the commonplace soprano; his afternoons and evenings in the conductor's chair, separated from the ogling, flirting thing only by the footlights, were to him a veritable torture.

Somehow his mind refused to accept the woman as she was, an ordinary, good little soul, whose chief passion in the world was for sweets, and who went her way through life undisturbed by any possibilities of other things.

To him she was irrevocably the fatal charmer whose smiles lost an honest man his soul, and by constant thought, ceaseless brooding, his sense of proportion was imperilled, the demarcation lines between the real and the unreal wavering and uncertain.

The night when Beechy, a most enchanting little gipsy, tripped about the stage for the first time in skirts, was the night she grew up in some ways.

There was a fearful, thoroughly feminine joy in the mock adoration of some of the men. The Remendado indeed kissed her, and her powers of acting were loudly applauded when in a perfectly sincere access of fury she boxed his large red ears.

"Brava, Signorina!"

Someone on this occasion even called her by her real name, in the fond delusion of making a pun.

"Signorina Bice—Signorina Beatrice! Che bel nome—beautiful Beatrice of Dante," with a low bow.

She was in an ecstasy of delight, the only drawback to perfect rapture being that no one else knew the marvellous humour of it all!

Her rough, curly black wig aged her face a little, she wore a padded vest under her bodice—she looked seventeen. She sang well, and she acted well, with the natural grace of all Italians and the originality of her own decided little entity. They were all proud of her. She was too young to provoke the ever-ready actors' jealousy, and besides, the

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men could not have been jealous of her travesty as a girl, while the women, of course, looked upon her as a boy.

It was a very involved and bewildering situation, but never was a situation better enjoyed by its occupant.

It was, also, something to be able to sing notes that flew well out over the braying orchestra, and found appreciation in the faces of the audience. When Mercédès bowed, her hand on her bosom, Beechy giggled audibly, and was reproved by the prompter.

The new tenor, who had not been present on the occasion of her appointment to her part, was the ready victim of a joke arranged by the Remendado. He was presented to Beechy.

"Signor Tenore, allow me to introduce you to my niece, Beatrice—h'm—Beatrice Bigi. She makes her debut to-night."

And the tenor, the pink and golden Torinese, bowed deeply. He was highly susceptible, and Beechy was indeed very pretty. She was also a flirt, and to everybody's joy, she led him a dance the whole evening, at last cuffing him soundly, to Landucci's hysterical amusement.

When she had reached the "Two Queens" and was alone, she stood in front of a broken glass that had recently been banished to her room to get it out of the way.

"Am I a boy dressed as a girl, or am I a girl dressed as a boy?" she asked herself; then she sat down and, starting the cradle-rocking, remained for nearly an hour dreaming and wondering.

CHAPTER IX

FATHER ANTONIO

SPRING brought to Rome that year an unusual quantity of daffodils, so that the old streets were full of the golden things. Carts of them, banks of them, baskets of them, bunches of them carried by foot-passengers, carriage-hoods filled with them, button-holes adorned by them.

Daffodils, daffodils everywhere, as if the splendid sunshine had spilled out of the sky and settled in pools and splashes all over Rome.

It was the boy Bici's last spring, and he loved it. It was the girl Beechy's first spring in some ways, and it went to her head like wine, and made her laugh and jest and chatter until everyone she knew laughed and jested and chatted with her.

Until, much later, real trouble came to her, she was never so much as bored. Healthy, well-fed, and busy, the joy of life was at times almost more than she could bear.

There were moments when her radiant smile of joy, a smile she could not repress, needed an excuse, and she made silly explanations of it to people. The very delight of being in the world was a great and marvellous thing, and frequently required the expression of a rapid *pas seul* or a roulade, copied with surprising fidelity (with all her faults of vocalisation) from Signorina Rlandi, the new soprano.

There are nowadays not many natures like Beechy's. It would seem that the world, beautiful as it is, is too old for such primitive joyousness, but when a human soul

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is given such a spirit, let it rejoice, for it holds one of the greatest gifts, if not the very greatest gift, ever known.

Possibly in early days, when the world was young, when the people old Homer (and what a young Homer they must have been, as Max Beerbohm says, to write as they did !) tells about, were living, loving, fighting creatures, there were more natures like Beechy's, more bubbling wells of animal joy.

She was like a kitten in the sun, like a song-bird at dawn singing to the light, like, in her joyous prodigality, the daffodils that gladdened her old city that eventful spring.

It was, moreover, no mere ebullition of youth. That one often sees. Most young things, thank God, are gay and keen, and full of quick laughter. One looks at sad-faced, peevish women, and remembers wonderingly how merry and hopeful they were twenty-five years ago ; but this characteristic of Beechy's was different. It was as much a part of her very spirit as her hands were a part of her person ; it was the essence of her ; the mainspring of her being ; her principal, held in trust for her against all possible expenditure of income ; it was a magic chain-armour shirt against the world's arrows ; it was a pair of wings to bear her away from things that would have killed her. It was the great gift of some beautiful heathen goddess to whose worship she unknowingly bowed, in spite of her Christian baptism and easy belief in saints and priests.

So Easter came ; roses and violets and tourists filled Rome, and Beechy's twelfth birthday dawned.

At this time she was a strong-limbed, rather square-built child with broad shoulders, a peculiarly well-poised walk, and an uplift of the chin which she kept always. Her large eyes, very clear and of a very unusually dark blue, like sapphires in the sun, held a fearless look like those of a boy. The beauty of her full, smooth eyelids, that was later much talked about, was not yet noticeable.

Her mouth, rather large, was not yet beautiful. It was

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too set in repose, too abandoned in laughter, but it was red and smooth over the white teeth that were not quite straight. Later, her mouth became very lovely.

As to her hair, close-cropped, the ends turning up like acanthus leaves, it was fine and dry, with a soft gloss and bluish shadows, and grew in a splendid smooth line round her brow, over the temples and ears, down to the nape. She never had short, untidy hair at the back of her neck, an unusual thing.

Early in the morning of Easter Sunday, Beechy rose and went to confession. It was a warm, bright morning, and the church was chill after the glow of the streets.

The old priest in the confessional listened with a dull ear to her conventional little sins, and absolved her without more to do.

She rose from her knees and went forward towards the altar and knelt politely, to say a few prayers. The altar was gay with flowers, several early worshippers knelt near her, and through a gorgeous, dingy, coloured window the baffled sun tried to peer in.

Beechy prayed rapidly, looking round her as she prayed.

"Holy Madonna," she said after a time, "help me to be good and successful; make my voice grow, and make the Signor stage-manager give me a rôle soon. Madonna *mia cara*——"

A heavy hand was at that moment laid on her shoulder, and turning she found the old priest looking down at her.

"Why are you dressed like this?" he asked sternly.

"Dressed—oh, like a boy, you mean?"

She rose, smiling broadly. She liked the old man, even though he frowned.

"Come into the sacristy when you have finished your prayers," he returned, and left her.

A moment later she found him sitting on a brown bench by the open sacristy door, a book in his hand.

"I am right in thinking that I confessed you a few minutes ago?"

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"Yes."

He looked shrewdly at her, his small bright eyes very sharp to see.

"You are a girl?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then why do you wear these unseemly clothes?"

She smiled. "They are nice clothes."

"You come to the House of God thus travestied! Shame on you!"

Beechy's smile disappeared. "I am not ashamed," she said; "I always wear boy's clothes."

The old man hesitated for a moment, and then asked her to explain.

She did so, very frankly, rather amused, on reflection, by her own skill in passing herself off for a boy, sorry to have offended a priest, but quite convinced that God was not in the least angry with her.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve to-day. This is my birthday."

Again she smiled, and he wavered. Her utter innocence baffled him.

"Do you not see that it is not—not—proper——"

Merrily she shook her head.

"Proper? But why? Am I not decently covered? And I can run, and jump—skirts," she added, with a comprehensive glance of sympathy at his dusty old *soutane*, "are such a nuisance, aren't they?"

Her eyes said more. They said: "After all, dear, good old man, isn't it rather a joke, you, a man in petticoats, scolding me, a girl, for wearing trousers?"

He shuffled his clumsy, silver-buckled shoes uneasily on the stone floor. "Are your father and mother alive?"

"No, both dead," she answered cheerfully.

"What—what were they?"

Vaguely he felt that she must be a little better bred than most of his parishioners.

But she did not understand.

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"My father was a Roman, *Padre*, and my mother was English."

"Ah!" The old man rose, rubbing his hands and nodding with relief. "English! That, then, explains it. There are no doubt many very good English people, but—they are all a little queer, all a little queer. And you? You have lived in England?"

She shook her head.

"No, *Padre*. I am a Roman."

She stood there, the Roman, a gallant little figure in the sunlight, the faded blue of her sailor collar throwing her rich colouring into fine relief. "I am all Roman, I!"

So she thought.

But the old man thought differently, and smiled at her very kindly.

"I see, I see, my dear," he said; "but—you are growing up, you are nearly a woman——"

"God forbid!" she interrupted heartily.

"Hush! Nearly a woman. And—it is time you wore the clothes of a female. Will you not take an old man's advice?"

She smiled at him. "Ah, *Padre*—dear Father—don't say that. Think of my poor legs in petticoats!"

"Your poor legs are too old to be—exposed. They must be covered. They *must*."

Out in the little patch of garden leading to the priest's house a bird sang in a blossoming almond-tree. Beechy forgot her legs and listened rapturously, her mouth quivering with delight.

"Oh, how lovely!" she cried. "I do love birds."

The old man, whose day, such as it had been, was done, watched her a little sadly. His eyes had been sharp, his wits keen, but his field of observation had necessarily been narrow. And here, in this brown-faced girl-boy he knew he had found something beyond his understanding. That she was half-foreign explained much, for every uneducated Italian knows that all foreigners are a little mad; but

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there was not only her strange blood to deal with, there was something else that he could not at all seize.

And this saddened him, for he was of those, perhaps really the salt of the earth, whose only ambition is to help others.

"You run great dangers by—this way of dressing," he murmured feebly.

"Oh, no ! Not that. You see, *Padre mio buono*, I am an opera-singer—at the Leopardi—and they are all very good to me. If I was a girl the women would not be good to me, because I sing well. Besides——"

"Besides ?"

"If the men knew I was a girl they would make love to me !" she chuckled. "Once I was dressed as a girl in a chorus, and the tenor tried to kiss me !"

Brazen reminiscences told at the foot of a great wooden crucifix in a sacristy on Easter Sunday !

A great clashing and clanging of bells, filling the air with their clangour, ended the conversation. Sighing, the old man rose and bade his visitor depart.

"Come and see me," he said gently. "I live across the garden—Father Antonio. You will come ?"

"Gladly, Father, and thank you."

But he knew something of the world after all.

"You promise ?" he insisted gently.

"I promise, Father."

Then he let her go, and she crossed the dark church again, with a hasty bob to the altar, and, her brow and fingers damp with blessed water, she pushed back the dirty leather curtain and went out into the sunny little piazzetta.

CHAPTER X

WHY GIACOMINI'S FACE WAS SCRATCHED

SIGNOR GIACOMINI, the husband of the dramatic soprano, was a typical *Mangia-cantante*, or, literally translated, "Singer-eater."

That is to say, he lived with beautiful completeness on his wife.

In early life a waiter in a restaurant he had on her first success retired from business, and settled down as a gentleman of leisure, haunter of theatres, sponge, vagabond, doer of dirty work.

Signora Giacomini loved him, and was an honest woman, but had she not been honest, the rôle of *mari complaisant* would assuredly have been added to the others he adorned.

He was a small, swaggering man, given to occasional eruptions of imitation jewelled tie-pins, studs, and chains. His eyes were puffy and sly, his hands dirty and eloquent.

He exists in theatrical circles by the hundred, and as a rule he is despised, though individually he is sometimes rather popular, for he is as often as not free with his wife's money, and always ready to waste time laughing, and playing cards, and drinking very slightly alcoholic drinks.

Giacomini possessed an intensely sweet little tenor voice, and might easily have sung in the chorus, had such a position not been beneath the dignity of the soprano's husband.

So he spent most of his time sitting in the wings criticising the artists, or playing cards at a café round the corner.

The man was thoroughly to be despised, and of no im-

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portance whatever except that he brought about a small event that was of certain usefulness to Beechy.

"Carmen" was at that time a new opera, and in Rome it was very popular; so after Easter it was put on again, and Beechy was permanently advanced to the part of first aid in high notes to Mercédès, *vice* Violetta Urbani, retired.

Landucci was ill, not too ill to go on with his so sorely needed work, but far from well. Beechy was very fond of the little director, and detested as cordially his carping, disagreeable wife. So it was with great joy that the girl came in one evening to find Landucci sitting by her window. "She has gone!" he cried, "gone for a whole week!"

"Bravo! But where!"

"To Calabria. Her mother is ill. Oh, Bici," the poor man went on, stretching his arms over his head with a deep sigh, "I *am* so glad!"

Beechy poured some water into her basin, and washed her hands.

"Glad! So am I! What luck to have her mother ill!"

"Oh, hush! I am sorry she's ill—you ought not to say that."

Beechy laughed. "Why not? I don't know her, and *somebody's* mother is bound to be ill, I suppose, so I'm glad it's the Signora Luisa's. You look tired, Maestro."

His face darkened. "Tired! Yes. Bici——" he hesitated, pushing the dark black hair from his brow.

"Ebbene?"

"How old are you—twelve? Yes. No. You are too young, too young——" he broke off, and gazed regretfully at her.

"Too young for what, Maestro?"

She stood still, the coarse towel in her hands.

With a shrug he tried to laugh. "No, no—it is nothing. Let's go and dine; you must be hungry."

She said no more, and they went downstairs to the restaurant.

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It was only six o'clock, and the place was empty. The director ordered some *macaroni* and a flask of Chianti. "This is the first meal I have had without her for over two years," he said. "*God!*"

Beechy, who was hungry, began to eat bread at once. She now paid for her food as she ate it, but only half what other people paid.

In return for this favour she read the paper every day to Signora Campi, and did that unwieldy woman's errands twice a week, devoting the whole afternoon to them.

It was a business arrangement like another, and proved very satisfactory both to the party of the first, and the party of the second.

Tripe and onions was her choice of a dish for that evening, and very good it was with bread and wine.

Landucci was silent at first, and then towards the end of the meal he began to talk.

"It is hell," he said, "neither more nor less, I tell you. And two hells in one life is too much. Too much!"

"Two hells?"

"Yes. The one at the theatre and then—here *with her*."

Beechy, whose table manners were, of course, those of her associates, wiped her plate scrupulously with a bit of bread and popped the bread into her mouth. "But—what hell at the theatre?" she asked.

Landucci poured out another glass of the oily dark wine. "Ha! You haven't seen it. Of course not. Who cares about—about me?"

Beechy glanced sharply at him. "You'll have a headache if you drink any more wine," she observed.

"Headache! Do you think a man whose heart is being torn to shreds by red-hot pincers can even *feel* a headache?" He laughed harshly.

His forcible language made no effect on Beechy, hyperbole is the natural expression of his kind. But his laugh was wild and his face very white.

"If he should get to the theatre drunk," she reflected,

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quite without horror, "there would be a row, and he would get the sack. What had I better do?"

"A headache!" he repeated with scorn.

"Well—at all events," she retorted adroitly, "you are being very greedy, and not giving me any."

This touched his mind, and eagerly he filled her glass.

There it stood. If she herself drank it, what would happen? The bottle was empty now but for a little, and that he drank thirstily.

"*Ebbene?* Don't you want it?"

She hesitated.

"Because if you don't—I have the devil's own thirst to-night——"

Rapidly her brain worked. If Landucci got drunk, he would be ruined. If she, Beechy, got drunk, it meant—she could go up to bed and merely pay a fine for missing a performance.

So she took the glass, looked at it with a funny little smile, and drained it.

"Bravo!" Landucci rose with a loud laugh. "Well done. Come along—it's time—time to get back there——"

Beechy followed him obediently. Because she did not at once stumble and fall, she concluded that the wine was not going to affect her.

They walked slowly through the streets, still in broad daylight, and then Landucci's voice became the voice of a man speaking through a trumpet. It was so loud, so resonant, so very, very queer. No one, strangely enough, turned to look at him, and this surprised Beechy.

Then she forgot his voice in the strangeness of finding that the street was paved with dough. Her feet sank into the dough, it stuck to them, they stuck to it; she pulled and shook them in vain.

Then Landucci looked at her for a moment, and with a sudden laugh picked her up and carried her the short way to the theatre.

"Don't bother him," she heard him say, somewhere

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miles away, as he laid her down; "he's tired, but he'll wake up in time to dress——"

Then oblivion.

When oblivion passed away in great shreds, like clouds after rain, letting in light and sight, music filled the air.

Beechy sat up and listened, smiling indulgently. Then her face changed. It was the Toreador's song! She was too late!

They were there, the others, at Lillas Pastia's, the quintet was sung, and what could it have been without her? Her artistic appreciation of her own value, a quality so often mistaken for conceit, gave her a little shock. The quintet, without any high notes must have been horrible, and the card scene was coming!

Giving herself a hard shake, she rose and made her way into the dressing-room, where her costume hung.

The dresser, an old woman with only one tooth, grinned at her. "Begun young, you have," she cried jeeringly. "The Materassi tried to wake you, but you only grinned and slept on——"

"Shut up," ordered Beechy, unabashed, "and help me dress. Thank goodness, I woke up in time for the fortune-telling——"

Hastily she got into her little red skirt and white blouse, and pulled the blue shawl round her shoulders. Her wig went on with a jerk, and a dab of paint on each cheek, administered with hasty skill, completed her preparations.

She was just going out when the door opened and Giacomini came in.

"Hello," he said, "why were you so late?"

"Drunk," returned Beechy, kicking off her boots and holding out her hand for her high-heeled slippers.

He laughed a little shamefacedly, for not only did he not believe her, but he thought she was referring to an increasing shortcoming of his own.

"Little beast!" he muttered. "I say, it's hard luck for

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you that you aren't really a girl. You'd be a very pretty one, you know."

She surveyed herself in the glass, pulling at her sleeves, and adjusting her wig with the frank absorption in her appearance that stage people all seem to have.

"Pretty, should I? You think so, old Red-Nose?"

Being a boy had decidedly deteriorated her manners, and her vocabulary was nearly as rough as that of her confrères.

He flushed angrily. "My nose isn't red," he retorted, "and if it was——"

"And if it was, your wife is a singer, isn't she, so you are a great swell——"

She pirouetted on her heels, and making a hideous grimace at him tried to dash past to the door.

But he was extremely angry, and he thought her only a very impertinent little boy.

Catching her tightly, he laid her over his knees and administered to her a short, sharp spanking.

"Take that, you little swine, and that——" he said, and then let her go with a laugh.

But she!

At that moment she became, so to speak, a girl. All sorts of hitherto unfelt delicacies sprang into life in her breast, feminine vanity, feminine pride, feminine helplessness set her raging.

And then—with feminine fingers she clawed his face, scoring it well under one eye, hurting him horribly, nearly blinding him as, all unprepared as he had been for the attack, he tried to disengage himself.

"You swine, you dog, you——" uneditable, all her epithets, culled from a choice vocabulary of street-boys' language.

She left him dancing with rage and pain. Incidentally, he called her things that at least equalled her epithets, but the mischief was done.

Only a woman thing could have done just that; a man

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thing would have gone at him with fists or feet, and the snarling, high-pitched, half-sobbing voice had also been that of a woman.

The singer-eater wiped his face with a checked purple-and-yellow handkerchief, and powdered it tenderly.

Then he went round to the wings. He had a plan.

CHAPTER XI

WHY BEECHY BECAME A GIRL

MEANTIME Beechy had gone on to sing Mercédès' rôle, that lady being what her English prototype would have styled down and out with toothache.

"You know the words, don't you?" asked the stage-manager, wiping his harassed brow.

"*Si, Signor Direttore.*"

That was all. And thus, that eventful night, Beechy sang a real namè-part.

Her immature, shrill voice was true, and she knew her lines perfectly. Things went well, and the Maestri of the orchestra smiled up at her encouragingly. She sang so hard that she nearly burst. Her one idea was to be heard, and in her ignorance shrieking seemed the only way to gain her end. So she shrieked. She also thoroughly enjoyed herself.

It happens to few to be spanked at ten o'clock and promoted to a name-rôle at eleven!

When her *duo* was over, she sat on a sack of shavings and looked round.

Everyone had a good word for her. She was not only popular, but she was to all these people of small intense rivalries, beyond the pale of competition. She was a boy.

But to-night more than one looked at her cunningly. She was thoroughly feminine, even in expression to-night.

"Give me a kiss, Mercédès," said Moralès, now a gipsy, making her an absurd bow.

"Stow it," answered the fair one vulgarly.

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* Her language was crude, but she was remarkably pretty, and—different from usual. .

Landucci was leading badly, his face as white as paper, his eyes burning.

He looked dangerous, and Beechy regretted her long sleep. If she had been awake she might have kept an eye on him. "I do hope he hasn't had any more wine," she thought.

Then Escamillo came on, and José's despair began. The barley-sugar tenor was a good actor, and there was no sugar about him now.

The scene between the two men (musically one of the finest in the opera) went on, and then Carmen interfered.

At this point Landucci usually began to smile with satisfaction, but to-night his tense face did not relax. Beechy watched him anxiously.

Disaster was indeed in the air.

"Look at the director," she whispered to Carmen, as that troublous person sauntered past her during José's short duologue with Micaëla; "doesn't he look *queer*?"

"He always does look queer," returned the woman indifferently. "Bici, have you seen my husband this evening?"

Beechy laughed. "*Sissignora*!"

"Why do you laugh?" Carmen turned, her painted eyes suddenly alight with a kind of hunger of suspicion.

"Whom was he talking to? Not——"

"With *me*," Beechy hastened to reassure her, and the woman sighed, relieved.

Beechy's smile, however, hovered on her lips still.

"Well—what are you laughing at?"

"He—I scratched him. Wait till you see his face!"

"Scratched him! But why?"

"He—struck me." Something within her prevented her from telling the whole truth, some new sense of indignity.

Signora Giacomini shrugged her shoulders as she prepared to go back to the centre of the stage. "Scratching is

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a woman's trick," she said, with light disdain. "*Boys don't do it!*"

Beechy stuck out her lip. It was true. Boys hammered the enemy with their fists—hitherto in her not infrequent battles, she too had done so, or even butted, goat-like.

"I scratched," she decided, half-ashamed of her sex, "because I *am* a girl. Oh, dear!"

Meantime everyone on the stage felt vaguely that something was in the air, something ominous.

Italians are extremely sensitive to such atmospheric warnings.

Beechy worked her way through the crowd to the right, and watched the faces of the chorus people, catching a whisper here and there.

"Look at him——" "*Santa Madonna*, what is it?" "If I were the tenor——"

The tenor had started away with Micaëla, the crowd making way for them—and thereby it seemed, as it always seems, that if they hurried, they might get away before Escamillo's return, and all the subsequent tragedy be averted.

Landucci was paler than ever now, and his hands waved, rather vaguely over the heads of his men.

"I'll get him home at once," Beechy decided, "as soon as it's over. He is ill, poor Maestro."

"Toreador——"

The insolent, triumphant air rang out from the left, Carmen started forward, her face expressing ecstatic delight.

José pushed his way through the crowd, haggard, desperate—his facial expression, Beechy saw with a shock of sudden terror, the counterpart of the director's.

Roughly he caught the woman and flung her down. "*Ser mia*," he thundered. "Thou art mine——"

At that minute, in the midst of the music, a pistol shot rang out, the tenor flung up his hands, and lurching heavily forward, fell.

For a moment the musicians played on, and the audience

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did not realise what had happened. Then a woman screamed, someone gave a loud laugh, the music clashed and broke off, and the stage was filled with a huddled, wild-faced crowd, in the centre of which knelt two or three people, and a man's voice cried, "Is there a doctor in the audience?"

Landucci stood still in his place. Then he turned and looked at the audience, his pistol still in his hand.

"*É Mia*," he said, with a silly laugh, paraphrasing José's last words. "She is mine!"

The confusion was indescribable, and in the midst of it a small thin man in brown clothes hurried down the aisle and clambered up over the footlights. The doctor.

The orchestra had already dispersed, but the director still stood in his place, looking now at his revolver, then at the audience.

As the curtain went down two men in long black cloaks and cocked hats came marching down the middle aisle, everyone making way for them. Policemen.

Landucci's quick eyes saw them, and he pointed his pistol at them. They paused.

"I will shoot you if you come any nearer," he called distinctly. "I am going to shoot several people to-night——"

The theatre was by this time nearly empty.

"You are covered from the stage," returned the quicker-witted of the two *guardie*. "If you shoot, you will be shot from behind——"

The madman hesitated and half turned.

"It is a lie—there is no one there—and she is mine now!"

The hubbub behind the curtain (on which was depicted a moonlit scene on Lake Como, strangely peaceful and out of place it seemed) had subsided.

The men of law consulted rapidly. Landucci could not leave the theatre. Whichever exit he might try was guarded, but he might do much harm with his pistol.

Suddenly from the left the great curtain stirred as if a

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mild earthquake were moving the marble balcony over the lake, and a small, white-faced woman came out.

"Maestro!" she called softly, leaning over the footlights. He looked over his shoulder.

"Oh, it's *you*. What do you want?"

"I want—will you help me down, please?"

He hesitated. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to come down."

She looked very small, and his mazed mind seemed to grasp the fact of her utter helplessness.

"Yes, I will help you, Bici—you, but no one else."

He went to the footlights, stood on a chair, and held out his hands. He had forgotten the *guardie*.

"Is he dead?" he asked cunningly, and she answered with a grave, unmoved face.

"Oh, yes, quite dead. Don't let me fall—oh, please put down that thing!"

He frowned and drew back. "No, oh, no, I won't put it down; don't be afraid of it——"

She leaned down and put her hands, trumpet-wise, to her mouth. "You know," she whispered, "I am really a *girl*!"

Landucci burst out laughing, and laid his pistol down on the edge of the stage. "So you are, *poverina*," he cried uproariously. "I had forgotten. Well, come along——"

A minute later he was held and bound by the *guardie*, and Beechy sat huddled on the floor by the big drum, crying as she had never cried in her life, shaken and trembling, and as feminine a creature as ever was born.

When the poor man had been taken away she crept back up on to the stage and went behind the curtain. The tenor, dead, lay where he had fallen, several people standing round him.

Carmen, leaning on her husband's arm, the stage-manager, Frasquita, who had been in a dead faint, and whose red hair was dark with water, the doctor, and one or two others.

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Beechy never forgot the picture ; the dirty stage with its coarsely painted rocks and trees ; the camp-fire still glowing like a ruby under its painted fuel ; the sacks and boxes of the smugglers ; the Toreador's cloak lying in a heap where he had in his horror dropped it ; and in the middle of the stage the pitifully small body of the dead man in his green velvet suit, his painted face stiff with horror.

"Has—he gone ?" whispered Frasquita, her lip shaking.

Beechy nodded. "Yes, the *guardie* took him. Oh, how awful it is !" She crossed herself as she looked at the dead man. "What had they quarrelled about ?"

Carmen shuddered, and laid her face against her husband's arm.

"Hush," said the stage-manager sharply. "You had all better go, Signora Giacomini——"

She nodded, and taking Beechy's hand, the three walked away towards her dressing-room.

Everyone else had gone, for Italians do not like tragedy, and have none of the morbid excitement of an English crowd.

Beechy sat down and began to cry, silently, without grimaces, big tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Don't, dear," said Carmen kindly, taking off her jacket. "It can't help——"

"But why did he do it ?" persisted the child ; "dear, good Maestro ! Why ?"

The woman paused as she stepped out of her skirt, and glanced at her husband.

"Mad, dear."

"Poor Maestro Landucci," declared the singer-eater, with vanity, "had the misfortune to—love my wife. And he was jealous."

Beechy dashed the tears from her eyes. "Oh !"

"Yes. And poor Mascheroni—he always hated him because my Signora in the opera loved him. I mean——"

"Oh, hush, Nino," protested Maria Giacomini. "What is the use of telling him ? He's too young to understand."

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"No, I'm not, Signora. I *do* understand. He was mad with jealousy, really, the way the poor tenor was as Don José. Oh, *poveretto, poveretto!* What will they do to him?"

Giacomini, whose scratched face hurt him, came near the child.

"They will let him off for a crime of passion, or they will shut him up as a lunatic, *Signorina*," he said slowly.

Beechy started. The man had lent a very marked significance to his last word.

"Do you understand, *Signorina*?" he added.

His wife, who was cleaning the grease from her face with cold cream, paid no heed. To her he was teasing a boy by referring to the girl's clothes he wore.

But Beechy knew that she was discovered.

"At the trial," pursued the man, licking his lips with enjoyment, "you will be an important witness; you knew the murderer well; you lived in the same house with him; you dined with him this very evening—or last night, for it is now after midnight. If you prove that he is sane—*good night!*" He made a gesture signifying that it would be the end of all things for Landucci. "And—you will be an interesting witness for *many reasons*."

Beechy watched him with fascinated loathing as he went on.

"'The boy Bici' will be in all the papers—'*the boy Bici*,' Signorina!"

Suddenly she was seized with a perfectly unreasoning terror. The trial, the newspapers, the badgering people—above all, this horrible leering man with the scratched face. They would all know that she was a girl, for he would tell.

And a blinding rush of shame of her travesty came over her. It seemed to her that she was a monstrous thing, that it was disgraceful to be a girl and wear a boy's clothes.

For the second time that night she felt herself a woman, and this time the realisation had come to stay.

Without a word she left the room, and hurrying into the clothes that she now blushed to wear, she crept past

WHY BEECHY BECAME A GIRL

the hunchback at the door, and once in the street ran as hard as she could run away from the direction of the "Two Queens." The horror of the morrow was too great to be borne, so she would not bear it.

It was striking one when she reached the Church of Saint Franceschino. The two great doors were closed, but to the right was a small wicket in a dusty old stone wall. And a rusty bell-wire hung by the wicket. Far away she heard the little tinkle. Then she waited. She waited for a long time, and pulled twice again before the wicket opened, and an old woman in a short skirt and a purple jacket asked her what she wanted.

"I must see Father Antonio——"

"Is it for the Sacrament?"

To have said yes would have been a bad lie. So she told a good lie instead.

"No, but it is—about a death. A confession——"

The old woman, who was the priest's cousin and servant, looked very cross; but her orders were strict, so Beechy was led across the little sleeping garden, that smelt of violets, to the house, and told to wait in a bare room adorned by a glaring chromolithograph of His Holiness Leo XIII.

The vast grin of that clever man at first interested, then rather appalled her. "He looks like a baboon," she thought irreverently, adding, "God forgive me."

Father Antonio, when he came in, found her standing, with her arms folded, her head bent, a Napoleonic attitude that was natural to her.

"So you have come back," the old man said gently, recognising her with surprise. "I am sorry to see that you are still wearing trousers."

Beechy drew a long breath.

"I have come to ask you to let me stay here for a day or two," she said simply. "I—I am tired of being a boy. I am going to be a girl now."

CHAPTER XII

THE CALL OF THE ORPHANS

THE instinctive evasion of unpleasantness and difficulties was as deep-seated in Beatrice Cavaleone as was the habit of breathing. She was no coward, as her going to Landucci when he had a revolver in his hand has proved. She had in her earlier days gone hungry to bed without a word of complaint; envy was unknown to her; the contemplation of beautifully dressed, well-fed children awoke in her only a sense of artistic pleasure. Forgiveness came to her with no effort whatsoever, and nothing she could do for those she loved (and she loved many people) was any trouble to her. She had her good points. But if an unpleasant situation could be evaded, she evaded it, conscienceless and content. In this matter of the inquest and trial she would have done her part, not only with scrupulous correctness, but also with a sort of grim enjoyment, for it would have been an experience, and her eager mind was hungry for experiences. She would have testified, given up her time, without a murmur, had it been a question of the boy Bici.

But Giacomini had showed her that the matter was not so simple. Not only the boy Bici, the hard-skulled newspaper-vendor, with his ready wit and store of forcible language, would be questioned and badgered; *he* could have borne it all with more than equanimity.

But that new person, the girl Beechy, how could she endure it?

She would suffer in her strange girl-feelings, incomprehensible to their owner, she would feel all hot in the

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cheeks as she had when that dog of a Giacomini had spanked her.

It was a strange thing, the boy Bici had been knocked about by other boys—there was one battle in the Piazza Navona the evening of Epiphany, out of which the boy Bici had emerged with an awful eye and a cut lip. She had been beaten then, and she had been angry and longed for revenge. But her feelings then had been quite different from those which lent sharpness to her nails after the spanking affair.

It was all a puzzle, but one thing was plain : the new creature, the girl, could not, and *would* not, go through the horrors of the inquest and trial. So she had come to Father Antonio, intending to stay, if he would allow her, for three days.

She stayed many months.

That is, she spent more than a year in the neighbouring convent of San Franceschino, and as the gardens of the convent opened into the priest's garden, never a day passed that she did not see the good old man and the sour-worded, kind-hearted old Assunta, his servant.

It came about very simply, as strange things were always to come to Beechy.

The morning after her arrival at his house, Father Antonio sent Assunta out to buy proper clothes for his guest.

The old woman, grumbling under her breath (for her cousin and master had an awful way of silencing her and bringing shame to her by quoting the New Testament to her), departed, a large basket on her arm.

Beechy wandered round the little garden, in which hyacinths were beginning to dig their way up to the sunlight, and waited.

Father Antonio was saying Mass, and the child was quite alone.

It was a mild day that smelt of spring. In one corner of the garden lilies of the valley were coming, and birds flew

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against the bright blue of the sky. A day that brings song naturally to the throat, and laughter to the lips.

Poor Maestro ! Beechy walked up and down, her arms folded, thinking of her friend and his probable fate. If things went badly, if any doubt grew in the minds of those responsible for his future, then she must go and help, feelings or no feelings. She remembered many things that had happened of late, things that might go to prove the poor man to be of unsound mind.

Ah, yes, if she could help him she would go. But if she could not help him, why should she leave this lovely quiet place that seemed so well to suit the new Beechy ?

To her mind it was perfectly logical and perfectly fair.

The quiet of the old, world-forgotten piazza was very soothing to her tired nerves ; from the church—a delightful church unvisited by tourists, for it held no art treasures, and no remnants of saintly humanity—came the drone of the organ ; in the piazza stood tall red houses, inhabited by decent poor people. Children played in the broad open space, not even cabs disturbed the silence, for the place was no thoroughfare, and there was nothing to see in it. A lost corner of the world ; a backwater of life.

Beechy knelt by a flower-bed and sniffed at the hyacinths. They smelt more of damp earth than of anything else, for their bells were still rolled tightly together, and their colours were veiled and chill.

Still, they smelt of spring. Everything smelt of spring.

Beechy rose, and to express her feelings turned half a dozen somersaults. Then she walked on her hands.

It was in this attitude, as she waved her clumsily-booted feet joyously in the air, that the horror-stricken old Assunta found her on her return.

"*Santissima Madonna!* Verily, I believe you are possessed," the old woman said, setting down her basket and locking the gate. "It is a scandal. Suppose one of the good Sisters should see you !"

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Beechy, right side up, rubbed her hands together and turned round. "One of the good Sisters?"

"Yes. In the convent. Holy ladies who teach poor children and pray for—the unregenerate."

"Like me! Then that is a convent? Well—I won't do it again, only, Assunta dear"—she picked up the basket and laid her arm over the old woman's bent shoulders—"you have no idea what a relief to one's feelings it is to walk on one's hands!"

When Father Antonio came in for his frugal breakfast, he found a tall girl in an ill-fitting, bright blue woollen frock, sitting in the garden.

Beechy had looked far better in her boy's clothes, for the blue frock was very hideous indeed. •

Also, she stumbled over the skirt, which was too long, and sitting in boyish attitudes gave her a queer look.

But Father Antonio was much pleased with the change.

Why she had come he did not know. He had asked no questions, possibly because he was learned in the matter of getting information from women, and as yet she had said nothing.

• At about four o'clock, when he called her, he found that she had disappeared.

She had taken the hat Assunta had brought her, a brown straw sailor, and gone out to buy a newspaper.

She got one without any difficulty, and holding up her skirts in a laughably clumsy way, hurried home.

Afraid to take the paper into the house, she tucked up her offending and senseless skirt and climbed into a tall tree that grew near the convent wall. •

• At almost the first words she closed her eyes and clung hard to the branch on which she was perched.

Landucci was dead. On his way to the police-station he had poisoned himself with some stuff he had had in his pocket.

"Mad, or not mad?" the paper asked, going into the matter at some length.

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Beechy, sick with horror, wondered. He had been in love with the Giacomini. And he had hated his own wife. He was jealous. He had prepared the poison, he had deliberately shot the man while in a position that absolutely prohibited his escape.

"Not mad," decided the child. "If he had been, he wouldn't have got the poison." And she never changed her mind.

For a long time she sat there among the young leaves, afraid to move. Landucci had been good to her, and she had seen the horror of his life, and she had loved him. Her father had gone, and her friend had gone. The world for about ten minutes seemed a very dreadful place to her.

Then, suddenly, a sound of singing came to her; a quaint, quiet singing; a simple, unadorned air, many voices, yet strangely without body. For a moment the sound added a new terror to things, and then she realised why it was strange.

There was no orchestra, and the voices were all children's. Plaintively cheerful it was, real music of orphans.

"Our little hearts we bring them,
Oh Mary dear, to thee——"

Beechy's brows untied and her mouth softened. Then, very cautiously, she climbed higher and looked down into the garden of the convent.

Forty odd little girls stood in two rows in the evening light, behind long, narrow tables, on which at regular intervals stood coarse brown bowls of milk, each flanked by a hunch of grey bread.

They wore ugly little grey frocks and white caps, under which their serious eyes looked very sweet, and their eighty odd little hands were neatly folded as they sang their grace before meat.

"Oh Mary dear, we thank thee
For all Thy sweet bountee——"

THE CRY OF THE ORPHANS

It was quite a delightful picture, and Beechy laughed aloud with appreciative delight:

"Little dears," she said, "how quaint they are!"

Two young nuns stood at each table, and when the grace was ended the children sat quietly down and dipped their big spoons into their milk.

Beechy's mind, thoroughly feminised by the innocent spectacle, flew back to the "Two Queens."

"Oh, my cradle," she thought, sick for home, "I want my cradle!"

An hour later, as Father Antonio sat dozing over his rosary, Beechy came in.

The room was small, floored with well-oiled dark brick, and contained, beside two straw-bottomed chairs, only a table, covered with a neat red-and-white cover, a chest of drawers, on which stood two piles of books and a white wax crucifix, twinkling with mica, under a glass case. On the wall hung the picture of the Pope, a rather good copy of Guido Reni's "Ecce Homo," and a water-colour sketch of the Cathedral of Siena. A bare and clean little room, its open door and window looking into the garden that spring had already smiled on.

The old priest's fine head stood out against the square of light that was the window, his diaphanous hands folded on his lap round the forgotten rosary. A good man full of years.

"Padre!"

He started, his big steel-rimmed glasses sliding down his long nose.

"Yes? Yes? What is it, my daughter?"

Beechy stood awkwardly in the doorway, her ungainly gown hanging stiffly round her.

"Father, I have been listening to the children sing. To the little orphans in the convent garden."

"Yes, my child?"

Cautiously, that she might not fall, she scratched one leg with the toe of her other boot.

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"I—I like orphans," she said.

"That is right. We should all love orphans——"

"Besides, I am one myself."

"Yes?"

The old man was tired, and did not quite guess her meaning, but his kindness was unfailing.

Beechy looked (with sincerest admiration) at the glistening crucifix with its ornament of ivy leaves.

"I was thinking," she went on slowly, "that perhaps the good Sisters would allow me to go and play with the orphans? With the very little ones?"

Father Antonio murmured a hasty prayer of thanks for this simple elucidation of his problem of what to do with his strange guest.

"I will ask the Mother Superior," he declared, taking a large pinch of snuff from an old tortoise-shell box, and sneezing into his red handkerchief. "I will go at once."

Beechy stood watching his tall bent figure as it crossed the garden and went into the precincts of the convent, to which he was a confessor.

The dramatic contrast of her present environment to the one she had just left was felt by the girl in every fibre.

The terrible event of the night before had unnerved her as much as things were ever to upset her, and the simple peace of the scene of the orphans' supper appealed very strongly to her.

The theatre seemed a thing obnoxious and too far away even to approach again. The evils of it stared at her, the beauties were dulled, effaced by the sordid tragedy that she had witnessed.

And only artists can understand how eagerly her mind embraced the new idea that appealed to her. Had it been possible for her to take eternal cloistral vows that evening, she would have taken them; the only life possible seemed the life between high walls, the only friends these quiet, religious people, the only music the hymns of the little orphans.

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The old man was a long time away. When he came back she ran to meet him. "Will they have me? Will they let me come?" she cried.

He smiled, a little sadly, for human nature is much the same wherever one finds it, and the simple old man had seen much.

"We shall see. You are to stay here, my guest, for a week, and go every day to the good Sisters. Then, at the end of the time, if you have pleased them—you are to go to them for a while—until—until—we shall see," he repeated vaguely.

The sun was going, and long, cool shadows crept across the garden.

Suddenly the evening bells began to ring all over Rome, soft in the mellow air.

"*Angelus Domini*," chanted the orphans.

Beechy crossed herself hurriedly, and then passing the old man as he hurried towards his church, and opened the door he had just closed.

The garden was full of the little grey-clad creatures, their caps spotless and upturned like so many white sweet pea blossoms.

"*Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto*——"

Beechy knew her prayers, for Signora Marianna, the publican's wife, had taught her. The hour and the place cast their spell over her, and her black head bent over her folded hands. She prayed with the orphans, under the approving eye of the young nuns in charge.

"*Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*——
Ecce Ancilla Domini."

• Thus Beatrice Cavaleone began her convent life.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE CONVENT

IT was characteristic of Beatrice Cavaleone that a plan should at once have created itself for her in the convent of San Franceschino. She wished to go and stay with the orphans, and a week from the evening when their little peaceful voices made their appeal to her imagination, she was installed in the cleapest of small rooms (nearly as good, she thought, as a cell) up at the top of the vast cold building.

Mother Maria Maddalena, her faculty complete, would, but for the charity incumbent on her position, have given a direct negative answer to the old priest's appeal, but she was a good woman, and had promised to see the child.

"She is too old to come to us as an orphan," she said, "but—perhaps we can give her work. We will try, Padre Antonio——"

But, as she stood by her window listening to the *Ave Maria* of her charges, she glanced beyond them and beheld the interloper just within the gate. And the interloper possessed the invaluable quality of graceful adaptability, so that she fitted into the picture as well even as the little nuns with their round, empty faces, or the small orphans themselves.

It seemed that a tall child in a hideous blue frock had always stood there by the old brick wall, her black head bent, her lips reverently framing the words of the prayer.

Mother Maria Maddalena's heart warmed.

"*Poverina*—poor little motherless child—and she has been well brought up, she knows the prayer——"

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So Beechy was asked to go in to see the Reverend Mother, and clumped down the cold passage to the Reverend Mother's room.

"Your name?"

"Beatrice Cavaleone."

"Cavaleone? Not *the* Cavaleone?"

"I don't know. My father is dead, and so is my mother."

"What was your father's name?"

"Giulio, Mother."

"And your mother's?"

"My mother's name was Smiss, and she was English."

"Smiss. I do not know the name. How old are you?"

"Twelve."

The gentle interrogation went on. It grew dark, and a lay sister who had had chilblains all winter, and whose walk was a ceaseless shuffle, brought in a lamp.

"When the children go for walks with two of the Sisters, you might go with them, and walk in the middle of the line——"

The Mother Superior hesitated, for this office that she was inventing was entirely a supererogatory one, and she knew it.

"Yes," agreed Beechy eagerly; "I could pick them up if they fell down."

"They never fall down," returned the Mother Superior, a little regretfully. "But if you went, Sister Ippolita, who walks along the line, might stay at home——"

"Yes. And then I could do lots of things here."

"Can you pare potatoes?"

"Yes," answered Beechy boldly. She had never in her life peeled a potato, but she felt within herself an undoubted capacity for that branch of labour.

"Can you sweep?"

"Yes. And I can wash windows like anything."

This she knew to be true, for she had kept her own small window at the "Two Queens" as bright as ever a

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window could be, for the excellent reason that she liked to be able to see out.

"And I can sing, Reverend Mother—I can teach them songs——"

Mother Maria Maddalena laughed, and waved away the suggestion with a mildly horrified fat hand.

"No, no, my dear. They sing only hymns, and those the dear Sisters teach them. If, later, you should have a vocation——"

But Beechy shook her head. "Oh, no, I shall never want to be a nun."

So she was taken in, so to speak, as "odd girl"—her work was to do anything that turned up, and she proved entirely satisfactory in her new rôle. Perhaps one reason for this was that the rôle gradually adapted itself to her, instead of her being obliged to adapt herself to it.

She liked to sweep. It is, indeed, a fine exercise, giving, once the arms are used to it, a glorious expansion to the chest, and a fine sensation of deep breathing. So she swept much. Washing windows, too, scrubbing at the panes until they glistened, was not unpleasant.

But washing clothes she did not like; and though she never objected verbally to doing it, it soon came about, no one quite knew how, that the washing of clothes was not one of her duties. Shaking and beating strips of carpet would not be bad, for it is a rough, boyish exercise, but the dust makes one sneeze, and one's eyes water after it. Beechy beat carpets three times, after which that department of work reverted to its former incumbent, one of the lay Sisters.

Digging in the garden with Sister Gismonda and Sister Ludovica, brown, rough, laughing peasant women, was the greatest of fun, so all summer Beechy worked in the brown earth, planted it, and laboured it to grow.

Also, for her slim hands were deft, and her taste good, all the flowers for the altars were arranged in their cheap white-and-gilt vases by her. It was delightful to get up

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early in the coolness of the morning and, in the still shadowy garden, to cut the sleeping flowers.

Then, the vases filled with fresh water, and standing in a row on the table in the refectory, she carried in her baskets, and set to work.

It was a long job, for she had the church altars as well as the convent chapel to adorn, and in the garden itself there was a grotto made of artlessly artificial rockwork, in which stood a different statuette for each month, before which flowers must bloom.

The Mary month, May, was the best ; but in June came a little Saint Joseph, in a splendid scarlet cloak ; July had Christ with the sacred heart glowing in His torn breast ; and all the other months had their saints.

The summer flew, each warm, languorous day full of hours ; but the season, looked back upon, having gone in a flash. Winter came and went, and summer again. Beechy, dressed like the orphans, in rough grey stuff, but without a cap, was as busy as the day is long. She loved the children, some of whom were not more than two years old, and they loved her. Once one little girl was very ill, and cried for Beechy. The nun in charge of her did her best to comfort the little thing, but in vain, and in the middle of the night Beechy was roused and bidden to come.

"Sing to me, Bice," moaned the sick child.

So Beechy sang, and after that was attached as a kind of under-nurse to the case.

In September, after nearly six weeks of illness, the child died, and there was a little pathetic funeral, the cheap white coffin followed by a string of weeping children to the old cemetery at the foot of the hill. Beechy never forgot the funeral ; the long tramp in the blazing sun, the bared heads of the passers-by, the gleaming light on the coffin.

Sister Arduina, the organist, asked a little later in the year permission to give Beechy singing lessons.

The Mother Superior assented.

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One day, in her second November in the convent, when the last roses in the garden were subject to temporary obliteration of leaves falling from the plane trees, Beechy went into the organ-loft where flat-nosed Sister Arduina was awaiting her.

She had sung, of course, all along, with the others, but the organist-sister had a plan for making her sing solos.

"At Christmas we might have a real bit of oratorio. And you could sing the soprano part."

"Yes," said Beechy, her thumbs stuck into her belt.

"How high can you sing?"

"B flat."

Sister Arduina opened her eyes very round.

"You mustn't boast," she admonished.

"I'm not boasting. Give me the middle b."

The nun did so, and Beechy struck the eighth higher with great ease, though some shrillness.

"Good! Now sing a scale."

Beechy obeyed. It was extraordinary how easily the child had learned obedience, after the rough independence she had had after her father's death. It is, however, a fact that obedience in indifferent matters is often easy to very strong-willed people.

They worked for nearly an hour, and then Beechy was sent to cut some roses for the house-chapel. Somehow the singing alone had reminded her of the theatre. She wondered how they all were, and the artists. If Giacomini was still there, and good old Piombini the basso. The little hunchbacked doorkeeper, was he still there, and who gave him Greek olives nowadays?

In the desolate autumnal garden the girl stood thoughtfully, her rusty scissors in her hand. She thought of the footlights' cheerful blaze, the good-natured, sweating scene-shifters, the delicious, thrilling tuning-up of the orchestra—it all seemed very far away and very wonderful. As she stood there the very feel of it seemed to come back to her; the very smell; the magic of it rushed over

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her like a warm tide, till her blood tingled in her veins, and her head swam.

"I must go back," she said aloud.

With a little start she set to work cutting the roses, poor, sad things on their leaf-bare bushes, and laid them in her old basket.

Her hands shook with impatience. How could she have borne it for so long? Looking back on the year and a half that she had been there, she could not understand herself. "I have been asleep," she said, as she snipped at the bushes. She went into the refectory, arranged her flowers, and went up to the chapel.

The place was nearly dark, and the red light over the altar glowed like a ruby in the dusk.

Against the pale evening sky the angular figures of the saints in the windows looked like ghosts, and a marble statue of Christ being taken from the cross made her start and shudder. She felt as if she had been living in a tomb. With a perfunctory reverence to the altar she set the big vases in their places and left the chapel.

"I will go after supper," she said; "only two hours, and then——"

CHAPTER XIV

BACK TO THE THEATRE

OH, the marvel of the streets at night after eighteen months of going to bed at nine o'clock. Oh, the excitement of the sauntering, pleasure-bent crowd, with, each member of it, his and her individual interests, and secrets, and ambitions. Oh, the beauty of the women, the strangeness of their clothes (fashions change a great deal in a year and a half), the gaiety of the lighted shops, the cosiness of the little fleeting scenes within them as one hurried by!

In a word, Beechy was full of the glory and majesty of life in a great city as she hastened down one of the seven hills, up and down another to the Corso, and by the narrow streets to the theatre. She did not realise it, but her habit-like gown and ugly felt hat stood her in good stead.

Almost as unobserved as if she had been a nun, she sped along, gazing intently at everything she passed, smiling, almost laughing to herself. People who love the country are almost invariably proud of their preference, and the urban-souled usually feel that they ought to explain why they prefer the ways of man to the haunts of trees and cattle.

Beechy was a town-lover, and as such adored the feel of the stones under her feet, the light-garlanded darkness, the people she passed, and I, for one, see no reason why she should have been ashamed of her love.

With all his faults, surely the city-bred man (I speak of the poorer classes) is a more living creature than his country cousin.

BACK TO THE THEATRE

Give me the gamin any day rather than the lout.

The night had come down chilly and a little windy. Men wrapped their long cloaks round them, hurrying women pulled closer their knitted scarves, children blew on their little fingers, and trotted hard to keep up with their elders. And the sound of Rome was like the beat of its great southern heart.

"*Ah Dio, Ah Dio,*" the girl repeated under her breath, "*Ah Dio, Dio, Dio,*" and in its inarticulate way it was a prayer.

A horse went down and a crowd collected. Beechy was one of the crowd. The poor beast, an underfed cabhorse, struggled and scrambled while its driver beat it over the head with the butt-end of his whip. (Their treatment of animals is not a phase of their character on which the lover of Italians cares to dwell.) The horse at last got up and galloped away, and the crowd dispersed.* A man and a woman emerged from the blackness of a side street. His arm was about her waist, her head leaning, to the detriment of her hat, against his arm.

"*Amor mio!*" he said, and she murmured in return, "*Amore!*" .

* Beechy heard them, and her smile was tender. Lovers. Alas, poor Landucci! Love, what was it? The dear, good Sisters would none of it. They loved Christ bleeding on His cross, but of earthly love they would not hear.

Yet Padre Antonio continually married people. Beechy had seen several weddings, so she knew. The nuns are rather—well, not silly, of course, but—illogical, the girl reflected, as they loitered behind the lovers, because if there were no lovers, there would be no fathers and mothers to die and leave dear little orphans to be cared for!

Ah, the world! The lights! The people!

Suddenly she found herself in front of the theatre. Large posters adorned the walls, and cabs stood in front of it, while the swing-doors seemed the converging point of the crowd.

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"Carmen!"

It was only of a piece with all the other marvels of the world that they should be giving "Carmen" to-night. Hurrying round to the stage-door she addressed the hunchback, still in his place, unchanged, apparently.

"Buona sera, Ercole!"

He looked up at her, wondering.

"Don't you know me?"

"Signorina—excuse me—no."

She laughed. "Don't you remember *il piccolo Bici*?"

The little man rubbed the back of his head. "Yes—but——"

"Well—I am the little Bici——"

Again she laughed, and he stared at her, puzzled, vaguely remembering her.

"But—Bici was a boy——"

"Yes—and now he is a girl. Signor Ercole—let me in, there's a dear."

A moment later and she was in the wings. The curtain had just gone up, and the men were still singing the opening chorus. Ah, the *smell* of it!

She stood sniffing, peering round her on all sides. She could not see the director of the orchestra from her place, but it seemed as though poor Landucci must be there, his wild black hair flying.

"Hi, what are you doing here?"

She turned, annoyed by the tone of the voice that addressed her. She had learned to be annoyed by minor things like vocal shades in speech.

"I—I am sorry. Am I in the way?"

The man stared at her with a little laugh. "I beg your pardon, Signorina, I suppose you have come to see one of the artists—Signora Celli?"

"Yes, please, I wish to see Signora Celli."

The man, who was a stage-carpenter, withdrew politely, and she stood for a long time watching.

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As she listened the music came back to her, she remembered it all, and sang softly under her breath.

When the curtain went down she awoke with a little start, and drew back to let the singers troop past her.

One of the first was old Narolo, one of the soldiers.

"Signor Narolo ! "

He stopped, wiping his face on his handkerchief.

"Signor Narolo, don't you know me ? Bici ? "

He stared. "Holy Madonna, yes, it is you, but——"

She caught his hand and held it in both hers. "I know I used to be a boy, but never mind that. I—I am so glad to be back ! "

"Where have you been ? "

She laughed a little hysterically. "In a convent. Tell me, are all the artists changed ? "

"Yes, all except Celli and me. The baritone Vendramini is singing in Petersburg. *Fa carriera, lui*. Ah, yes, he makes a career, while we others——"

"May I see la Celli ? " asked Beechy eagerly.

The man spread his hands. "I don't know. Shall I go and see ? By the way, have you heard that Vendramini married poor Maestro Landucci's widow ? "

Beechy gasped. She had not yet learned the fact that some women, irrespective of looks, character, or fortune, possess what may be called the marrying faculty, and are never at a loss for a husband.

"The baritone ! But why ? "

Narolo shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows ? " he returned philosophically.

A moment later he returned, and led Beechy into Micaëla's presence.

La Celli was a good soul, and apparently packed full of short screeches, which she let forth from her stiff painted mouth in lieu of words. "*Aïe*," she said, when she saw Beechy. "Oh ! "

To her the appearance in her dressing-room of a young

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girl in semi-monastical garb was too astounding a thing to be met with articulate language.

Beechy held out her hand. "How do you do, Signorina?" she said rapidly. "I am Beatrice Cavaleone, who used to sing in the boys' chorus in 'Carmen,' and then as supplementary Mercédès. Little Bici. Yes, I know you thought I was a boy. Well, I wasn't. How are you? You are in excellent voice."

"Oh, I have had a very bad throat, very. But I have an inhaling machine that is doing marvels for me, marvels. How do you like my dress? Yes, of course, I thought you were a boy. Where have you been all this time?"

Beechy told her as much as she wished to have known, which was not much, and then in her turn asked some questions. She learned all the news of the little theatre; that the new director of the orchestra was charming, so good-tempered; that the tenor was not bad, but wanted all the applause, and was very jealous of her, the Celli's, popularity; that the woman singing Carmen was a stick, with no voice at all, but who had a friend who paid a very big *claque* for her, so that she was encored every evening.

"*Una vergogna*—a shame, *caro*—I should say *cara*, but I can't get over the feeling that you are a boy."

The stage-manager was the same. "He is married, and his wife is very rich."

"Where are the Giacomini?" asked Beechy, keenly interested in it all.

"She is singing in Messina this winter. Her little girl died, poor soul. He is worse than ever, lives like a prince, on her shoulders. Husbands are horrible," added Micaëla, giving a dash of black to her right eyebrow.

"Yes," agreed Beechy. "Signorina, I want to learn to sing."

But Celli, like most artists, was grave over the possibility of another's learning what she had learned.

"To sing, my child? Ah, it is a difficult art."

BACK TO THE THEATRE

"I know. But I—I must learn. And you, who sing so well—you will advise me." •

This was not conscious artfulness on the young girl's part; it was part of her artistic nature, the unerring instinct for the right thing in the right place. Later she had days of the clumsiest blundering, when she said and did the most uncomfortable things, but these were days when her artistic nature was troubled by the conventional one that grew up with her experience of the world. For the present she was that happiest of human things, an uncomplicated artistic nature growing towards expression. Celli smiled with the simple vanity of her kind.

"Well—they *do* say I sing well—open that drawer there, dear, and you'll find last night's paper. It's marked in blue pencil——" •

Obediently Beechy read the conventional words of approval. An odd wave of pity swept over her as she read. This would not have satisfied her. No. For her things would have to be big.

At length, after ten minutes' skilful conversational leading, she drew from Celli that her teacher was one Signora Scarpia, who lived up four flights of stairs at the back of an old palace near the Palace of the Cæsars.

"I will write to her and tell her about you," concluded the little woman rather grandly.

"Ah, yes, a word from you——" •

Beechy left her and went back to the wings. Some of the chorus-people, on hearing who she was, came and talked to her. They had all liked her, for when she had been at the theatre she was too young to have used the strong will that later made many enemies for her.

• Her eyes glowing, she told her simple story, without, however, naming the convent, for she knew that the gentle nuns would not welcome their theatrical brethren and sisters. The stage-manager (beautifully dressed now, and with a very wealthy manner) paid her courteous compliments on her appearance.

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"You are going to be very beautiful," he said. "Even now, with good clothes——"

Perhaps he was right, for while clothes do not make the man, they certainly very nearly make the woman. Beechy showed her teeth in a pleased grin.

"You think so? So much the better." (What she really said was *meno male*, which means literally, "so much less bad.")

Everyone was greatly amused at seeing her, for the singer-eater had told one or two of his discovery that she was a girl, and some of the new artists had laughed at the story, and now here was the heroine. Until the lights were out, and even the grandest of the artists leaving (for it takes the creator of a name-rôle much longer to get the grease paint off his or her face than it does a humble lady or gentleman of the chorus), Beechy stayed on. She knew that there would be a row at the convent on her return, but the joy of being once more on a stage was irresistible.

Her thin nostrils inflated nervously like those of a horse as she talked and listened, her cheeks burned crimson.

Then at last she, too, left the theatre, and hurried homewards.

It was very cold now, and scudding clouds made the moonlight fitful and fantastic.

At the gate of the convent, before she pulled the bell, the girl stood and looked out at the piazza.

"Oh, the poor nuns," she said, under her breath, "never to be able to go about at night!"

CHAPTER XV

OLD FRIENDS

"IT is an unpardonable thing to have done," declared Father Antonio severely.

"Nothing is unpardonable, *Padre caro*," returned Beechy, with a more saintly expression than usual.

The old man's eyes fixed themselves on her for a moment. "When there is repentance comes pardon; not when there is stiff-necked pride in evil-doing."

The morning sun lay in pleasant patches on the brick floor, the cat purred loudly, and from the kitchen came a delightful sound of frying.

"Do I smell it with my ears," Beechy wondered, "or hear it with my nose?"

Good Mother Maria Maddalena had, after a long talk with the girl, sent her over to be scolded by Father Antonio. And Father Antonio had scolded for about ten minutes, with no effect whatsoever. Beechy stood before him in a respectful attitude, her hands clasped against her scant grey skirt, her clumsily booted feet quite quiet.

Only—her face wore a most inappropriate expression of triumph.

"You are not showing the gratitude I had hoped for," sighed the old man at length.

"But I ~~am~~ grateful, Padre! Grateful I am," she went on, changing the wording of her phrase in the pretty Italian way. "You have all been so good to me, so good! I shall never forget it. And I love you all—even Sister Veronica, with the beard. But now I must go. I must go and learn to sing."

"But I cannot let you go, my dear. You are a child,

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you do not know the world, you have no parents, you are alone——”

It was the old, old story, and, of course, youth won.

Beechy sweetly smiled at him, but her smile was inexorable. “I will go and live with Signora Campi at the ‘Two Queens.’ She is very fond of me, and will be glad to have me.”

Her confidence was rather beautiful, and the old man could not find it in his heart to disturb it. If he had tried, however, he would have failed, for the sense of security in the affection of her kind was a very strong one in the child, and lasted more or less all her life.

“But—who will pay for your singing lessons?”

This he expected to be a facier, but it failed.

“I shall work,” she returned.

“In what way? What can you do?”

“I can cook, I can sweep, I can clean lamps, I can sell newspapers, I can make beds, I can blow an organ, I can dig——”

She was, in thus naming her accomplishments, perfectly serious. It was ridiculous, but not to her. She had a keen sense of humour, but it did not apply to herself at this early period of her life.

Father Antonio shook his head gently.

“You cannot sell papers nor dig now, you are too old; and for the other things, surely you don’t wish to be a housemaid?”

Beechy stood, looking what the French very expressively call interdicted. This aspect of the case appeared to her for the first time. She had been living on charity—on generous, loving charity, and as she had worked in the same spirit from morning to night, no feeling of humiliation had ever come to her. Nor did it come, retrospectively, now.

It is a gracious quality, that of giving well, but there are not many people who receive well, and of these few Beechy was one. Quite simply she took all her life what

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was given to her. If Father Antonio had said to her : "Here is money, go and live as you like," she would have been profoundly grateful in the sense that warm love for him would have surged up in her heart, but she would have felt no immediate impulse of return in kind.

It is hard to explain this, but it exists in some artist souls, and when it has existed and been educated away, a great charm of childlikeness has gone with it.

But the old priest's words now taught the girl that she had no means of living unless, as he said, she became a servant.

"I should not like to be a housemaid," she said thoughtfully.

Father Antonio took a pinch of snuff

"While your father lived," he said, "there was money ?"

"Yes. Very little, but—I didn't have to work."

"Well—how did it come ? Did you go to a bank for it ?"

"No, the postman used to bring it every quarter. I wonder——"

"And so do I wonder ! Why did you never inquire ? Someone must have sent it to him—you never asked ?"

Beechy spread out her hands. "*Chè !* No, there was no one to ask. The Commendatore might have known, but he never came again, and then I went to the 'Two Queens.'"

Father Antonio put his old snuff-box into his pocket and waited for his sneeze. It came at length, shaking him delightfully, and then he spoke.

"I will find out for you—through the Post Office people. Strange that it never occurred to us before. And then if you insist on leaving us—I shall miss you, Bice—I will find some good woman who will take you into her home——"

Beechy thanked him and went slowly into the garden. The sun had come out warm and yellow, as if winter were over and spring knocking at the gates. The roses that had looked lonely and chilly the evening before glowed proudly, boasting of the way that they were keeping their youth.

But to Beechy the charm had gone. She had loved the

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convent, but now its time had passed, and the world was calling her.

She moved restlessly about, forgetting her work, regardless of the gentle, troubled faces that now and then looked out at her from the windows. She wished to go to the "Two Queens," back to her little room under the roof, back to the old cradle that she had rocked every night in fantastic pity for some little wakeful ghost-baby in it.

She wanted people.

Up and down the garden she paced, her arms crossed in her Napoleonic way, her little round chin almost touching the bib of her blue holland apron. People, noisy, clamorous, eager, selfish, living people. Even the hurrying, fussy waiters in the "Two Queens" restaurant interested her. They were alive.

And the dear, good nuns were half alive, to be sure, but also half dead. What did they know of the magic of the city? What would a great crowd be to them but a terror? What would be to them the bursting into bloom of these night-flowers the street lamps?

No, poor things, when they took their vows and lay before the altar like the dead, it was true that something of them died—the best part, it seemed to Beechy: their imaginations.

"Bice, we are going for our walk; will you come?"

Sister Monica, youngest and prettiest of the nuns, stood there in the sun, her sweet brown eyes troubled, her brown hands clasped. Beechy nodded. "Yes, my Sister."

Together they went to the house, and found the orphans lined up ready to start. Forty-five little creatures in grey cloaks and ugly black hats, and they all smiled and chattered as Beechy came in.

Her eyes filled with tears. They were small, the orphans, but they were alive, and they loved her and she loved them. She would miss them, and they would miss her.

"Oh, you dears!" she cried suddenly, kneeling down, and gathering the two nearest to her breast,

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All the tiny creatures rushed at her, shoving and scolding each other, trying to reach her warm arms.

It was a pretty sight, and Sister Monica's eyes filled with tears as she watched. She was less dead than Beechy thought, Sister Monica.

The children gathered round Beechy like bees round a flower, and she kissed all she could reach, her eyes wet.

Then order was restored, and the little procession filed out of the big door into the street, a nun at the head and a nun at the tail, and Beechy in the middle leading a very small orphan by the hand. They did not go into the city. Instead, they turned sharp off up the hill, and then going down a flight of steep steps, came out near one of the city gates, and under its old arch they marched, and then out a long, desolate, muddy street, past humble shops and ugly houses of workpeople.

It was a horrible walk, and Beechy loathed it. "Beautiful Rome," she thought, "of all your streets, why must we come here?"

High carts piled with stones creaked by, splashing the orphans with mud, filling the air with their rumbling and rattle. The orphans prattled, enjoying the sunlight and the movement. The nuns and Beechy were silent.

At length the end of the street was reached. It ended like a street in a dream, abruptly. The last house in it was a tall tenement built as a speculation; a failure. Beyond it stretched a brick- and paper-scattered wilderness, and beyond that the Campagna. The mountains were veiled in purple haze, the sky above them blue. The distance seemed infinite. For a moment the little group of feminine creatures stood and watched the scene. They all loved its beauty, even the little ones, all but Beechy.

The country saddened her; wide spaces filled her with a kind of uneasiness; the romance of the mountains gave her a sensation only to be explained very badly by the word embarrassment.

And she felt an intruder, and as such, shy. She sighed

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with relief when they turned and started back towards the city.

As they reached the convent door Father Antonio passed them, his old umbrella under his arm, his shoe-buckles twinkling in the sun. He smiled as he went by, and Beechy, when the last orphan had filed past her into the dark hallway, turned without a word and rushed after him.

"Padre, you are going to the Via del Violino," she panted at the top of the east end of the piazza. "I must go with you."

He did not protest, perhaps because he was wise enough in his gentle old age to feel that already she was lost to them, that the world's claims on her could not be denied.

"Ebbene, child," he said; "you may come."

Several people turned in the friendly Italian way to look after them as they crossed the city. The little old priest, with the long white locks hanging from under his shabby, clean hat, and the springing, vigorous, handsome child. Grey sackcloth did not seem appropriate wear for Beechy. She walked as though she wore velvet, and her hideous hat with its black ribbons looked like a carnival freak of disguise.

"It seems that I should have gone long ago to see them all in the Street of the Violin," she said, as the old man gently refused alms to a beggar. "They will think I have forgotten them, but I have not—I love them all. Dear Signora Marianna and dear old Agnese! She's the one who gave me the boy's clothes, you know! She has a bird-shop. Such beautiful birds! Do you like birds, Father Antonio?"

"Yes, my dear."

"I must go and see Lamberti, too," she went on, "while you are at the post office. Old Lamberti will be surprised to find me so tall; he used to say I should be a dwarf—to tease me, you know. And I'll go and see Simeone, too——"

Father Antonio smiled. "You are very anxious to see

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them all, my dear," he said. "Have you not thought of them all this time?"

Beechy paused for a second. "No," she answered with unabashed frankness; "I haven't *thought* of them, but I didn't forget them."

"That seems strange."

"Strange? No, Padre, *mio buono*. It is like—say one's summer hat. It is put away in the autumn, and one doesn't think about it during the winter because it is winter, and one wears one's winter hat. But when the summer comes——" She made a fluttering, expressive movement with her hand, "one gets out one's hat, and is *delighted* to wear it again."

The joyous egotism of this parabolic explanation did not escape the priest, but he did not protest, he merely said: "Some people would not care to be regarded as your summer hat, my child."

But Beechy laughed.

"But why? I do not mind being *theirs*," she returned. And she meant it.

Father Antonio, who was full of the instinctive wisdom that intelligent priests, be they never so shut in, almost invariably become possessed of, watched her closely during the time they passed in the Street of the Violin. For she insisted on his going with her to see all her friends, and he went.

To the restaurant, where the children all seemed to Beechy to be grown almost beyond belief; to the bird-shop, where old Agnese hardly recognised Beechy in her turn, and where a fine new grey parrot had come to live.

To the chair-seat maker's dark box of a shop, where a packet of chocolate was at once found for the girl, but where reproaches about the long desertion of the old street were loud and eloquent.

"You forgot us," the old man repeated, rubbing his red nose indignantly, "forgot all your old friends."

"But I *didn't*," Beechy protested, munching the choco-

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late with great relish; "I didn't forget you a bit, did I, Father Antonio?"

The old man smiled from the big chair that had been dragged into the shop from the back room in his honour. "Children are different from grown people, Signore," he said with innocent diplomacy to Lamberti.

"And how is Giovacchino?" inquired Beechy, "and little Filippina in Napoli?"

"They are quite well," Lamberti admitted grudgingly.

"And," went on Beechy, "*did* Luigi marry the vineyard-keeper's daughter?"

Her face was aglow with real interest, and Lamberti melted suddenly.

"Ah," he said, rumpling his hair with a violent motion, and turning to the priest. "It is not heart that she lacks, the little one——"

"No," agreed Father Antonio, well pleased.

"*What is it, then?*"

Beechy's voice almost throbbed with the excitement of the question. "What is it I lack?"

"Not vanity," chuckled Lamberti, "that is certain."

But calling her vain never hurt her in the least. She was vain as naturally as a peacock is, and when her self-interest was touched deeply, as it was on this occasion, her insistence was unending. Alexis Wauchope, the critic, once said of her that her vanity was so great that he always saw her in an iridescent light, as though she was surrounded by spiritual peacocks' feathers.

"You do not yet realise," answered the priest, rising, and speaking with conscientious seriousness, "the importance of other people."

Beechy said good-bye to Lamberti, and then after walking in silence for several minutes, answered the criticism.

"Well," she said decisively, "if *I* don't, *they* do, and that evens things up."

CHAPTER XVI

BEECHY MEETS A PRINCE AND A TENOR

THE most romantic things have a way of happening to certain people from the day they are old enough to toddle across the room. Other people may travel, tempt Fortune in a variety of ways, lose and make fortunes, love, marry, and be buried without the smallest unexpected event breaking the hideous monotony of their days. One blames dull people for their dulness, than which exists no greater injustice. Who wishes to be dull? No one. And those poor creatures who are dull ought to receive from the lucky others at least the tribute of pity.

Beechy was of the adventurous type, but that in itself meant nothing. Many adventurous-minded people are dodged all their days by romantic happenings. I know a woman who went through Persia on horseback, and all that happened to her worth remembering was that she broke the busk of her stays, and was made miserable thereby for days.

Now Beechy was of the sort to whom if shut up in one room in an hotel in Manchester, something diverting would happen, even if the hotel had to be burnt to the ground to bring it about.

And it was certainly romantic to find through the Post Office people that the small sum of two thousand lire had been sent through the post in quarterly payments to the late Giulio Cavaleone from old Prince Cavaleone who lived in the palace in the Corso.

The old postman whom Beechy had known all her life had known all about it, and he was easy enough to find.

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Father Antonio drew a deep breath. If Beechy was one of the Cavaleone she was, to his simple mind, provided for, and there seemed no doubt about it at all.

"Did your father ever talk about his people?" he asked the child as they made their way homewards.

"No."

"Never?"

"Never, *Padre mio*."

"And after his death the money ceased to be sent," mused the priest, who was tired, and had a stone in his shoe. "That looks as though the Signor Principe does not know of your existence. Did your father ever write letters?"

Beechy reflected. "I can't remember—but I never posted any for him. Perhaps the Commendatore——"

The afternoon was chill, and gusts of rain flew into their faces as they hurried home. Rome is a city of many colour expressions; sometimes she dresses herself in violet, sometimes in ruddy gold, sometimes in grey. To-night she was a dull grey city, desolate and empty-looking as the rain came down harder.

"We must let the old Signor Principe know that you are alive," Father Antonio said, turning up the collar of his old coat. "I will write to him."

"Why don't we go to see him?" suggested Beechy calmly.

She was not at all elated by the discovery of her relationship to a princely house, for Italians are not snobs, and princes are many. But she was keenly interested, and fully alive to the material advantages of her new position.

"I should like to live in a palace," she mused, "and I will buy a long string of coral beads at once."

The old priest's little living-room looked very cosy after the long walk in the rain. Beechy, whose black woollen ankles were wet, kicked off her shoes and sat down by the little stove.

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"It's the palace with the loggia under the roof, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes. And a fountain by Bernini in the courtyard. But don't dream about living there, my dear. If your father had been friendly with the family, you would not have lived in the Via del Violino. Or he may have been only a very distant cousin whom the Signor Principe helped because of the name."

Beechy, who was crouching over the fire, sat up suddenly. "No! I know why it was," she exclaimed. "It was because he married my mother. I remember once he and the Commendatore were talking about it while I was in bed. My mother was a—nursemaid or something. She was English."

"Ah!"

The old man's face fell. Matters did not look to him very promising. An English nursemaid and an obstinate younger son. He knew of the old prince enough to convince him that the child of such a marriage stood a very small chance of any kindness from him.

If Beechy's father had been a son of the head of the house her chances were very small indeed.

If, on the other hand, he had been merely one of the distant connections to whom great Romans are so wonderfully good, the old man might consent to provide for the child.

At least, Father Antonio told himself, the effort must be made, and Beechy's suggestion that she should go with him to see her great relation seemed a good one. Unconsciously the old priest counted on the child's quality of charm as an asset in the important interview.

He had given up all hope of persuading her to renounce her ideas of studying singing; indeed, such was her innocent power of conviction, he even began to see that, as God undoubtedly meant opera-singers to exist, Beechy must be one of those predestined to that fate.

It saddened the good old man, for the life looked to

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him a terrible one full of temptation, and he loved Beechy ; but sad things are often the most inevitable, and life had taught him the value of the immediate and gracious acceptance of the unavoidable.

So the two plotters laid their heads together and planned the storming of the palace in the Corso.

Three or four days later the very grand majordomo at the door of the palace was startled by the appearance of a shabby old priest and a long-legged little girl, who demanded quite simply to see His Excellency.

"His Excellency ! *Per Bacco*, and have you an engagement with him ? "

The man, very gorgeous in his green-and-gold livery, his tall, gold-knobbed stick in his hand, showed quite plainly that he scorned the poor.

His question was one of rather malignant sarcasm, but it evoked an astonishing answer.

"Yes," returned the priest. "He told us to come at three."

So there was nothing for it but to allow these amazing guests to pass ; to hand them on to another man in livery, who dwelt in a pen under the great stone staircase, and who, conducting them up to the *piano nobile*, presented them to a third and very haughty functionary in black, who led them down long corridors through endless doors, across the great ballrooms, whose shining floors were pathed with narrow strips of red carpet.

At last their guide stopped, knocked at a door, and after listening with smooth, bent head for an answer, opened the door, and led them into a small room lined with books.

By a generous open fire sat an old man, a large Russian boarhound at his feet.

"Oh," he said, bowing curtly. "You have come. Chairs, Giovanni."

Beechy looked at him. In his hands lay her destiny, and never since God had with His hands created the world, had anything ever been so important as her destiny.

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"You say you are Giulio Cavaleone's daughter?" asked the old man.

"*Sissignore.*"

"Have you any proofs?"

Beechy, whose own identity was to her the most undeniable thing in the universe, gave a little gasp.

"Proofs?" asked Father Antonio gently. "All the people where she lived until—about three years ago—knew both her father and her. There can be no doubt, Signor Principe."

"There can always be doubt about everything. Have you her baptismal certificate? The—the marriage certificate?"

"No, Signor Principe."

"H'm. Well, my position is this. Giulio Cavaleone was my second cousin. For reasons of my own I brought him up under my roof. He disobeyed me in the matter of his marriage, and I never saw him again. When he became an invalid an old acquaintance of mine, Commendatore Luchini, came and asked me to help him, so I sent him money. When he died, the money was returned to me, and the child having disappeared, I thought no more about her. She has, as you no doubt know, relations in England."

Father Antonio looked at Beechy, who shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I only know that my mother's name was——"

"Your mother's name was Smith, and her father had," he paused, to give full weight to his information, "a shop in Fulham."

"Oh," said Beechy. "What fun!"

The two old men looked at her. She was obviously delighted by the tidings. "And where is the Commendatore? I will go and see him. You see, I had never known his name——"

Prince Cavaleone was silent for a moment, his mean face quite expressionless. Then he said to Father Antonio:

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"She is, I see, Giulio Cavaleone's daughter. I will have my steward send her the money I sent her father—with the arrears. And now—I have the honour to——" he rose. "I have your address, and will have the money sent to your care. Good evening."

The priest's quiet bow said little, and Beechy was as silent.

When they were again in the street she said thoughtfully: "What a horrid old man! But, then, *that* doesn't matter. Did you see what funny little eyes he had? And what a horrid little mouth!"

"I had hoped he might be kinder; blood ought to tell," sighed the priest.

"Blood! He may keep his blood," Beechy laughed as she spoke; "but it is nice to have some money." And she never referred to her august distant cousin again.

Father Antonio wondered sometimes if it never occurred to her that a little more humanity on Cavaleone's part might have meant for her a share of the good things of the world, but apparently the thought never came to her.

Her ambition was to study for the opera, and now that it was attained she was perfectly happy.

All her life she was like this; unacquisitive to a very remarkable degree, unenvious, demanding as a right the things her nature made essential to her, but disregarding of the merely luxurious or even the merely beautiful.

The story about the twenty-six hats is true, but that came long after, and was a mere freak of her imagination.

So back she went to the "Two Queens," for no amount of persuasion could induce her to stay on at the convent, or even with her beloved Padre.

Back to the "Two Queens," to fat Signora Campi with the black velvet spots on her smooth cheeks, to the little room at the very top of the tall red house, to the broken basin and the empty cradle.

Her days were full and busy, for she was incapable of idleness. All her life when she got into mischief, investi-

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gation might have proved that the mischief had been preceded by a period of enforced inactivity. For her, indeed, did Satan find trouble when her hands were momentarily idle.

But in those early days her mischievous characteristics were still dormant in her little flat breast, and good Campi being true to her former principle of giving the girl the best of food, but of getting from her in return as much work as possible, Beechy speedily developed into a very good little under-housekeeper indeed.

She rose early, swept, brought the Signora her coffee on a tray, looked after the waiters, made these gentry sweep (a thing they all loathed), and struggled with some success against their deep-laid habit of spitting on the restaurant floor.

The hotel part of the "Two Queens" was a very old-established business, and frequented by provincial tradespeople of the better class.

Those ladies who indulged in the luxury of breakfast in bed were served those three years by a tall, rather ungainly girl, with red, busy hands, and a remarkably attractive smile; a girl whose manners were a trifle queer, but who, when she brought hot water, brought it hot, and under whose sway towels never ran out.

But in the afternoons a very different Beechy was to be seen leaving the old house and making her rapid way to a street near the Palace of the Cæsars. A dark-attired girl with decent cotton gloves and a hat that framed her face, and looked as if it really lived on her head. She was gifted in the putting on of hats.

She was, although rather awkward at that time in rooms, a very good walker. She walked as though there were strong steel springs in her feet, and her head was always held up. The woman who taught her singing was a dark, blowsy, stayless person with a moustache, who lived year in and year out in her little apartment at the top of the house. She never came down into the street, and her

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passion was the breeding of canaries. All her life Beechy could close her eyes and hear the ceaseless twitter and piping of the myriad little yellow things hung in their cages in the sun.

Signora Scarpia was a very good singing-teacher, and a conscientious woman. She had had a sister who was a famous operatic contralto, and thus had heard much music, and knew what she was about in her lessons.

Beechy sang very little at first, because she was so young, but the Signora, whose own voice had been very good, and whom only an overwhelming indolence had deterred from an operatic career on her own account, used to sing to her.

In these days of gramophones there is nothing new in the idea, but in Beechy's early years it was an original one.

Sitting in a shabby plush chair, watching the blue of the sky between the screen of little cages and flitting yellow birds, Beechy heard the soprano parts from the old operas.

Long before she could sing it Lucia's madness was a thing to hum under her breath as she worked. And one morning, about a year after her going back to the "Two Queens," something happened.

Beechy, a red handkerchief tied round her head to protect her hair from the dust, was busily sweeping a room on the first floor of the hotel.

And as she worked she sang. "*Ah, fors'è lui*," she sang, her young, rather hard voice as clear as a bell. She was fifteen now, and a tall, vigorous girl, with a strong, big throat, and a large and flexible mouth, a mouth that made itself square when she sang.

Her voice, never very big, was even then extremely pliable, and the roulades and trills bubbled out as exactly, as purely, as if she had been a bird.

Suddenly the door leading to the next room was opened, and a man's face, half-covered with lather, appeared in the crack.

BEECHY MEETS A PRINCE

"*Madonna!* And who are you to sing like that? Not much of a voice, but—but you can sing."

Beechy burst out laughing. "Your servant, sir," she answered. "Why shouldn't I sing?"

After all, why shouldn't she?

The man retired, and after a moment returned more fully clothed, and with the hastily dried lather gleaming on his fat face.

"I am Subiaco," he said, much as if he had said, "I am Napoleon."

Beechy dropped her broom. "Subiaco!"

"*Sissignora—servo suo,*" he mocked, parodying her words of a few minutes before.

Beechy's feelings cannot be described. For the man was the greatest Italian tenor of his day, a creature to be spoken of with bated breath; to hear whom even Signora Scarpia had left her eyrie and descended, choking, in stays.

"Well?" he asked sharply.

Beechy stared. "Will you sing for me?" she asked.

The great man (who, such are the ups and downs of artistic life, had, ten years before, sold stoves in Bologna) laughed, his mouth squaring itself about his white teeth, as Beechy's did.

"*Per Bacco!* Yes, I will sing for you. And you shall sing for me."

CHAPTER XVII

A BUNDLE OF LETTERS

THE next day the great man arrived, puffing woefully, at Signora Scarpia's door. He was accompanied by his accompanist, a melancholy man with a drooping moustache like a Chinaman's.

Signora Scarpia, in a green plush garment, received the two men with such a profusion of thanks and exclamations of gratitude that Subiaco shut her up rather abruptly.

"I heard your pupil sing," he said, spreading his fat red fingers, that looked like so many little sausages, on his knees. "You have taught her well."

"Yes, I hope I have. *Del resto*, I myself studied with Lamperti, and my sister is Giulia Trupetti."

"Indeed. Then we are in an artistic country. So much the better. How old are you, Signorina—and what is your name?"

Beechy gave him the desired information, and subsided again into her excited silence.

"Too young. I mean too young for any sustained work. You must stick to your brooms—and to the Signora's careful instruction for several years yet."

"She is a distant cousin of Prince Cavaleone," explained the Scarpia. "Her mother was English."

Subiaco shook his head. He did not approve of the English.

"Sing something for me," he said.

The depressed accompanist spread his coat-tails with the greatest care over the back of the piano stool, as if they were priceless tail feathers of some kind, and began to play.

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"What shall I sing?" asked Beechy.

After a moment's reflection the Scarpia decided in favour of an old Italian canzone, "*Caro mio ben*." It did not suit Beechy's voice at all, and she sang it very badly.

"*H'm!*" said Subiaco, rubbing his remarkably azure chin.

There was a moment's silence, and then Beechy turned to him. "May I sing '*Fors è lui*'?"

"Yes. Try it."

And she sang it from beginning to end, without a fault. It is an extremely difficult aria, but the qualities it most calls for are the qualities possessed by the girl more than any other at that time,—later, of course, her voice became much heavier—extreme highness of pitch and great flexibility.

She carolled away, a hand on her hip, her red mouth squared, her eyes dancing with pleasure, and when she had finished the little man with the big diamond in his shirt signified his approbation in the most unqualified way. He kissed her soundly.

"*Brava, brava!* And to you, Signora! All my felicitations, to you both. The *timbre* is perfect, and the execution quite extraordinary for so young a singer. Signorina, if you continue to work, you will one day be a very great coloratura-singer." (This, of course, was a mistake.)

Signora Scarpia flushed and panted with gratification. Beechy stood still by the piano.

"Do you mean it?" she asked with sudden ungraciousness.

"Mean it? Does Camillo Subiaco lie about his art?"

After which they all partook of some sweet white wine in small green glasses, and little crisp cakes, of which Beechy ate a great many.

Subiaco was the kindest of little men, and before he left he had given the Scarpia a voucher for a third-tier box at the opera that very night.

It was all most romantic and wonderful, and the rest of

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the afternoon was passed by Signora Scarpia, kind soul, in arranging one of her own blouses for Beechy to wear.

Beechy never forgot that blouse, which she heartily admired, and which always, in her memory, had about it a touch of magic. It was pale blue, and had a black velvet collar, on which were stitched little round flakes of silver.

Beechy's hair, now long, was loose on her shoulders, smooth, black waves reaching nearly to her waist, hair with shadows in the hollows of its waves, and high lights of an indescribable colour in their crests.

"You are very pretty, *cara*," pronounced the good Scarpia, herself resplendent in purple.

Beechy went silently to a glass-doored wardrobe and contemplated herself.

"The blouse is beautiful," she said, "but I? My mouth is too big and too red, and my eyes are—queer——"

Signora Scarpia nodded. "Yes, your eyes are queer, dear; and they will be queerer before long."

But Beechy's vanity did not extend to her physical appearance. She asked no question regarding her friend's speech, and the friends supped. They had, that night of Beechy's first appearance in an audience, spaghetti, with tomatoes and large slices of garlicky salami. These, washed down with rough new Chianti and water, made a sufficiently good supper for anyone, and there is a little Italian *restaurateur* near Covent Garden Opera House who still boasts of the great singer who some years after that famous evening used to come to his place and beg him in rapid Roman dialect to make her just such spaghetti!

The canaries that night had been put to bed, their little cages shrouded with squares of grey muslin; the window, of course, was tight-closed against the pernicious evening air; the little room was warm, ill-ventilated, and overfull of stuffy, shabby furniture.

But to Beechy it was all a part of a beautiful whole, and as such she never forgot it.

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At last the cab came ! A cab ! Wicked luxury paid for by Beechy, and the journey was accomplished in safety, although the horse fell down, and nearly decided to die where he lay.

Signora Scarpia, very magnificent and short in her manner to the old man who conducted them to their box, would have amused Beechy on any other occasion, but the girl was too engrossed in her own sensations to notice any external thing.

"There," said Signora Scarpia, when she had settled herself in her place, "is the Mayor."

Beechy did not answer. Mayors were as naught to her, and even the smartly dressed people in the boxes below.

To her the dark well of the orchestra and the curtain beyond were the beginning and the ending of the world. Behind that red velvet was the stage. The stage with its queer smell, its painted wings, its dust, its shirt-sleeved men—Life, in a word.

And it seemed to the girl that time had rolled back, and that she must be standing, dressed as a boy, down in the darkness, waiting for Landucci to speak to her. The intervening time was gone, impossible to realise. The large white gloves on her hands, what were they ? and the blue blouse ?

For a moment Beechy literally and honestly asked herself, such was her excitement, what these things meant. Then the maestri of the orchestra came out from the dark doors under the stage, and the ravishing sound of tuning up began ; a sound she never could hear without a certain queer little thrill in the back of her neck.

The opera was "Rigoletto," and it was well sung. Gilda was old, but a good artist, and as the duke little Subiaco was in his glory.

His was one of the musical, beguiling, disturbing voices produced only in Italy. And in a rather common way he was a good actor. His little plump legs (cunningly elongated by high heels) were encased in rose-coloured tights,

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his doublet was black embroidered in silver. And his wig—it was amusing, his wig.

"*Com'è bello*," whispered Signora Scarpia.

Beechy did not hear her.

Leaning forward in her place, the girl listened, listened, her eyes half closed under their thick white lids.

She was even then an intensely keen critic, and with her delight mingled regrets for the obvious age of the over-painted Gilda.

"I could sing that," was her first remark, as Gilda finished her famous aria.

And there, in four words, was her attitude. Could she, Beatrice Cavaleone, do such and such a thing, or could she not?

And it was that very night that the germ of her great idea, the idea of which, later, English newspapers were to make such a great deal, quickened in her mind.

"How much do tickets here cost?" she asked the Scarpia, at the end of the second act. "I mean, up there in the gallery—first row, in the middle."

"A lira, or one-fifty—why?"

"Because," returned Beechy, with great calm, "I am going to come to the opera every night."

"While Subiaco is here?"

"No. Always."

The Scarpia gasped, and opened her fan with a rapid gesture, not at all in keeping with the hitherto studied majesty of her demeanour.

"Always?"

"Yes. I find that I must see all the operas that there are. And in that way I shall learn to act, while you are teaching me how to sing. For instance, Gilda uses her arms as if they were wings. She flaps them. I shall not do that."

And she did not.

Her great idea embodied the beginnings of a very original and curious system, by which she abided with the greatest scrupulousness.

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It was, to put it shortly, a system of elimination. Daria used her arms like wings; Agostini never stood still; Marie Malapert attacked the high notes half a turn too low, and slid up to them; Augusta Bremer, the great Wagnerian, sang in her throat, and rolled her eyes.

And all these defects, as well as a hundred others in a hundred other singers, Beechy noted and avoided. Her voice, as I have said, was never of the very first flight, but her management of it was marvellous, and her acting quite the best of any living operatic soprano. She was the only one, remember, whose "Marguerite" was as young and innocent as Goethe meant her to be. Not even Melba, of the golden throat, could quite produce Cavaleone's effort of unprotected, piteous youth. It was when she was twenty-three that Aubépine told someone he loathed singing "Faust" with her, she made him feel such an unmitigated monster!

Imagine her going doggedly night after night to the gallery of the Costanzi, no matter how tired she might be, no matter what the weather was.

All winter she went, and during the short spring season. Then came summer, when her evenings were passed with Signora Scarpia or with Father Antonio. The nuns she visited fairly often, and they were always glad to see her.

She had deserted them, but her sober, hard-working life did them credit, and they loved her.

The little garden was very pleasant in the summer, and the young girl had no hesitation in declaring that her visits were more frequent in the summer than in the winter for that reason.

She never could see why her own innocent preferences need be concealed.

Occasionally she would toil up the Gianicolo to the shabby old villa where the Commendatore lived with a married daughter.

The Commendatore, discovered by means of the address Prince Cavaleone had given Father Antonio, was always

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glad to see the daughter of his friend, but Beechy did not greatly like him. He was distinctly not *simpatico*, and his attitude towards her career was mutely inimical. These people are all of minor importance, but such as they were, they were Beechy's friends during her most impressionable years, and therefore they must be described.

All this time—up to the day, ten years after her meeting with Camillo Subiaco, when she left England—she was under the gentle, penetrating influence of the good nuns and the old priest.

At the same time she went, whenever there was opera, to her solitary outpost in the world of art, in the gallery of the Costanzi, filling her ears and her brain with music, and the mimic life so magically fascinating to her. And occasionally she would spend a long day in the Street of the Violin, hearing all the news of her old friends there, listening to it with the keenest interest, giving quite unasked the best advice she could think of, keeping fresh in her heart all the memories of her earliest childhood that might otherwise have been gradually effaced by time.

Could she, later, when her own personal drama came to her, have been expected to take it as would have taken it some young girl with only *one* bringing-up?

I say no.

She had no book-learning beyond a very little that she had acquired in the convent, and she never loved reading for its own sake.

And, one day in October, when she was seventeen and a half, something else happened, and a new phase began for her.

She was sitting by the window one Sunday afternoon, watching a pouring rain that she feared would prevent her making her intended visit to Father Antonio. If she had been sitting straight in her chair—the old chair in which her father had always sat—nothing might have occurred. But she was sitting on one foot, and sidewise, and at a sudden noise overhead which she mistook for a knock, she

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jumped up. On such trifles as a bit of unsewn tape round the inside of a skirt, can so much hang.

Her foot caught, she lost her balance, flung out her arms, and fell back, opening, as she fell, a small recess in the left arm of the chair.

And in the opening, a place half the length of the chair-arm, were several letters neatly tied together, and a flat, green cardboard box.

Beechy, ecstatically surprised, opened the box, and there she found several things.

A faded daguerreotype of a young woman with a wreath of flowers balanced on her very smooth hair; a bracelet made of gold, with "Caroline" and a date engraved on it, a lock of faded brown hair, and a tarnished filigree silver cross, such as one can buy in Rome by the million for a few pence apiece. Valueless stuff; but to Beechy most precious, for the things had, of course, belonged to her mother, and as such had been cherished by her father.

The girl's eyes filled with tears. Her poor little mother had worn the trinkets, the picture must be hers, and the lock of hair had probably been cut from her head after her death.

She had never before missed her mother, but now, at the sight of the curiously personal little trifles that were all that was left of her, the girl suddenly felt very lonely. Reverently she took the letters from the yellowed envelopes. There were five.

Two were written in very bad Italian in a pretty, delicate hand, and began, "*Mio carissimo Giulio.*" The other three were dated "Herne Road, Fulham," some time before her own birth, and were in three different hand-writings.

But they were in English, and Beechy could not read one word of them.

For a long time she sat there in the dull little room, the letters and the trinkets on her lap.

After all life was a sad thing. Her poor little foreign

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mother Caroline—why had she had to die, and leave her little baby ?

As she dreamed, her eyes on the empty cradle, Beechy almost saw her own dusky six-months-old head on the little pillow.

"How I must have missed her!" she thought. "*Poor* little baby!"

CHAPTER XVIII

'ENRY PEECROFT'S LETTER

THERE was in the convent a little old sister who had once been in England, and who was supposed to enjoy a complete mastery of the barbarous tongue of that island.

This was Sister Caterina, who spent that part of her life that was not engaged in prayer, surrounded by great baskets and pots of different sorts of vegetables that she was engaged in transforming into various kinds of soup for the great household.

She was a small squat woman with bright little black eyes and a broad mouth scarred with smallpox. The daughter of a poor peasant, she had grown up in the Campagna under the shadow of an old bit of aqueduct. Her childhood was passed in hard out-of-door labour, man's work, and even now, after years of vegetable-preparing, her arms were the strongest in the convent.

And while she worked, digging, ploughing, binding up the scant sheaves, her mind dwelt with dogged persistency with the Blessed Mother and the saints.

To her they were the whole romance of life, and, indeed, regarded simply as legend, the lives of the saints are very charming reading.

- A famous atheist has said that the story of Christ's birth is the most beautiful piece of fiction ever invented. And to the poor peasant girl, believing reverently every scrap of lore that came her way, and pondering it over and over in her heart, her real life was the dream and her dream life the real.

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So when her father died and her brothers went away to America, her ideal was fulfilled, and she became a nun.

And now she had been for thirty-five years preparing and washing vegetables in the kitchen of the Convent of San Franceschino, and her mind had become a vast storehouse of holy legend.

She was sitting by a window one day in October, paring turnips. A picturesque old place, the kitchen, with smoke-stained arched roof, and dark angles lighted by the gleam of copper pots and kettles.

Several Sisters bustled about in the distance, near the stoves, preparing dinner, but Sister Caterina was in a world of her own.

She was back in the Middle Ages, living over with a certain holy woman her cruel experiences under (oh, horror, hardly to be thought of!) a wicked Mother Superior.

The height of cruelty was reached when the wicked woman ordered the poor girl to bring her fried snowballs for her supper, and the miracle consisted of the obedient frying of the snowballs.

Sister Caterina's fingers flew over her turnips, but her eyes were veiled. Surely it was a very wonderful miracle, and its humble worker was now a blessed saint in Paradise!

The hard-featured old woman's expression was very beautiful in its simple reverence.

When Beechy, her cheeks glowing with her quick walk in the autumn air, came into the kitchen, the Sisters all greeted her affectionately.

"Well, thanks, very well—and you all? No, thanks, nothing to eat—I can stay only a few moments, for I have an engagement. I want to see—ah, there she is——"

Sister Caterina was surprised, for Beechy had never wasted much time on her. The good woman was too absorbed in her visions to be very amusing to the young girl. But now Beechy needed her, and, of course, came to her without hesitation.

"You speak English, Sister?"

HENRY PEECROFT'S LETTER

"Ah, yes, *Bice mia*. Was I not three years in Isle of Wight with the dear Sisters?"

Beechy sat down and took from her pocket the letters she had found a few days before.

"These letters are written to my mother by her people in England. I want you to read them to me."

Sister Caterina wiped her hands on her blue apron and put on her spectacles.

"I cannot read the English well," she confessed; "they spell it in a manner quite senseless! But I will try——"

Bice waited patiently, going over in her mind a difficult bit of recitative in "*Sonnambula*."

It was a pleasant place, the warm old kitchen, and the girl had no fastidious dislike of the smell of cooking.

"If we eat it, why can't we smell it?" she asked some one years later.

Outside in the old garden the trees tossed in a high wind, and in the city dust rolled in clouds. To workers, the mere fact of cessation from work and being in warmth, suffices for their pleasure, and Beechy was a worker.

• One of the nuns took from the fire a great copper full of boiled potatoes, and began piling them up on platters. It was dinner-time.

Beef was boiling hard, too, and the nuns hurried about in cheerful confusion.

"H'm! She says—they were angry, it seems. They 'much-a-displeased'—'*molto dispiaciuti*.' They not wish her to marry an Italian!"

The old woman's face expressed amused contempt for this ridiculous attitude of mind.

"They say she should come back and marry 'Enry—Enrico somebody. The father was ill. And they have all been to the *cappella* to pray. Even in England, you see, prayer is the best thing!"

The next letter, written a month later, was found to mean that the disapproved marriage had taken place.

"She has made a bed—what can that mean?—and must

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lie on it. That means that she was very ill, probably. And she is never to write to them again. And the father was very ill——”

Beechy thrust out her lip. “Never to write to them! A nice, kind family that!”

Sister Caterina caught up a turnip and pared it with masterly swiftness.

“They were probably very grand people,” she said, “and very rich. And rich English people, oh, so proud.”

“Do you think,” asked Beechy suddenly, “that they are rich?”

“All English people are either very rich or beggars. But why?”

“Read the other letter, please, dear Sister——”

The other letter was written by one Henry Pycraft, and after stating briefly that old Mr. Smith had died suddenly the day before, informed Mrs. Cavaleone that the family begged her not to write to them again. “They are very just, but very unforgiving, as you know, and they will never forgive you. I forgive you, though, Carrie,” he continued, in his rather ornate writing, in which the upstrokes were delicate and the downstrokes heavy. “I forgive you with all my heart. Please buy with this five-pound note some little present for your baby. And I pray God that you may be happy.—Yours always, Henry Pycraft.”

“He was rich, too,” declared Sister Caterina. “Five pounds, that is—*vediamo un po*—120 francs! A hundred and twenty francs to buy a little present for her baby.”

“That was me,” observed Beechy absently.

She sat in the embrasure of the window, her hands clasped round one knee.

Against the dull grey background of the autumnal garden her warmly coloured face stood out clearly. She was thinking, her brows drawn sharply together, her red lips still extended a little. “He was a good man,” she said. “I like him.”

'ENRY PEECROFT'S LETTER

The great bell calling the nuns to their midday meal broke up the little conference, and Beechy, with hurried farewells, took her leave.

The letters had disappointed her, but there was something in Sister Caterina's suggestion as to the worldly importance of the writers.

"If they are rich, they ought to be good to me—at least, that Signor Peecroft. Signora Scarpia is right; I ought to learn, to study. If I wrote to Signor Peecraft?"

She wrote to Signor Peecraft. She wrote a brief but comprehensive statement of her situation, and then had it translated at a "bureau," where such work was done, and when she had posted it, she waited for the answer.

The answer came, and after a consultation with the faithful Scarpia, it, too, was taken to the bureau for accurate translation.

Beechy never forgot her reading of Henry Peecraft's letter.

She took it into the nearest church, and sat down to read it by the candles on a side altar to the Madonna.

"My dear child," it began, "your letter has greatly puzzled me. I was very fond of your poor mother, and deeply mourned her loss. But a few years ago I married her sister Augusta, and Augusta, who is a woman of very strong feelings, has never forgiven your mother for becoming a Papist."

At this word, left in its original form, for the reason that Italian has for it no exact equivalent, Beechy made a long halt.

What was a Papist? Evidently something very bad. And yet it could not have been very bad, or her father would not so have loved her mother.

"I am greatly interested in what you tell me of your voice, but we think the operatic career a very wrong one. Your Aunt Augusta considers opera absolutely sinful, and I am sure would never consent to knowing you if you continue in your present way of thinking. Could you not

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give up the perilous plan? If you do, I am sure I can persuade your Aunt Augusta to allow you to come and visit us. God has blessed us plentifully, and I would love to give to poor Carrie's girl out of my abundance. I have not yet mentioned your letter to your Aunt Augusta; but if you will write me that you will give up this plan of singing in opera, I will approach her on the matter. God bless you, my dear child.

"Yours truly,

"HENRY PYECRAFT."

Beechy sat for some time in the dusky old church, her hands clasped on the letter.

It was very quiet. At a distant altar several people knelt, shapeless dark masses, on the stone floor; tall candles burned motionless in the still air.

In a stained-glass window over the high altar the figure of Saint George stood out against the dull sky in a mysterious glow of colour.

He held a great sword that was about to pierce the neck of the writhing dragon, and his billowing cloak was cherry-coloured above his armour.

Beechy watched him for several minutes, her mind a perfect blank. This was a thing that happened to her occasionally, and was as a rule the preliminary to some important decision.

It was as if, subconsciously, she cleared her brain of all thought, and that the decision when it came to her should flash clean in a clean surface.

Then she gave a little laugh.

"Poor 'Enry Peecroft!" she said to herself.

And as she spoke she knew that she was going to England.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ROVING DROP

"GOOD-BYE, dear Father Antonio. Give all the dear Sisters my love again, and the orphans. Good-bye, Signora Campi; it was good of you to come to see me off! Dearest Scarpia, thank you again a thousand times for all that you have done for me. *Addio, Lamberti caro vecchio—Addio, Signora Marianna—Addio tutti—addio—addio—*"

She leaned out of the window as the train started, a bouquet in each hand, her hat on one side, her cheeks crimson with excitement.

The dears, how good they had all been to her, and how kind it was of them to come to the station to see her off! God bless them all.

Then—they were out of sight, gone; they were a part of the past.

The present consisted of a third-class compartment in the train bound for the north. And the future—a grim aunt Augusta, and a small, piteous, pale 'Enry Peecroft.

She knew that he was small and piteous, though she had neither written to nor heard from him since that day in the church a week ago.

One of her great-uncles, Pianluca Cavaleone, had been a wanderer on the face of the earth; he had travelled all his life, roughing it cheerfully in then almost unknown quarters of the globe, living on dried meat and native food, sleeping on the ground, or in horrible huts, when, a very rich man, he might have lived like a king in any civilised place. This because he had the magic drop in his veins that pre-

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vents its owner (or its slave) from ever settling down. And Beechy had inherited from this uncle a percentage of the magic drop. She was a born traveller. Not only were discomforts as nothing to her, but the mere fact of being in motion filled her with an explicable exhilaration of the senses.

It seemed to her, all her life, that she saw and heard with marvellously increased keenness the minute she was moving.

And that early November morning she was in a train for the first time in her life.

A fat and dirty priest dozed opposite her. Next him dozed a peasant in a red-lined cloak. There were two children in the compartment, one of whom had a surgical bandage round its head. Then there was their mother, a gaudily dressed woman with ugly sly eyes.

An unattractive crowd enough, but keenly interesting to Beechy, for they were people. She wondered about them. Why the old priest was so dirty, why his house-keeper didn't make him shave; why the peasant knew that the red lining would change his cloak from a mere covering to an ornamental garment full of romance. Why the child had had an operation, why it smelt so very badly of some strong drug; why the mother was so unpleasant to behold. She wondered how old they all were, what their names were.

Then the marvel of the flying landscape caught and held her; the beautiful unrolling of the view; the mystery of the ever just-to-be-rounded curve, the glory of the sudden revelation as the train flew along.

"There will be a house there to the right, and children at the door," she thought, making a kind of wager with herself.

They travelled into a heavy rainstorm, when for the first time she saw the beauties of flying cloud-shadows over white mountains.

They paused in stations where little dramas of greetings

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and good-byes were taking place, as they always are, bringing small pangs of sympathy or envy to the imaginative beholder.

It was a new world to the girl.

The hours passed, she changed into another train, leaving all her companions, and stepping into a new act of life, as it seemed to her theatre-soaked mind.

Here, during the night, she made friends with a tear-stained girl of about twenty, and the girl told her that her lover had deserted her; and cried, and moaned, her hands to her breast.

"What did you do—to make him go, I mean?" asked Beechy, watching her keenly.

"Nothing! I was just the same. I didn't change—it was *he* who changed. He used to call me a white blossom, because I am so pale; but now he says I am like a cream-cheese, and he hates the sight of me! It is the same face, but his eyes have changed," mourned the poor creature.

"No one has more than one face," she added, suddenly sullen.

Beechy, her cheek resting against her dirty hand, nodded thoughtfully.

"Actresses have," she mused. "And—any woman might."

"Any woman might? Have more than one face! That's all you know," cried the little victim of man's caprice, with disdain. "You have never loved anyone, so how can you tell?"

"If I loved a man," Beechy returned, unmoved, with that characteristic immovability of hers, "I should not let my face bore him any more than I should let my mind."

Something in her manner arrested the other girl, who stared as she mopped her face with her very black handkerchief.

"How—how would you do?" she asked presently.

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When Beechy had followed her idea to what seemed to her its logical conclusion, she answered :

"If I was a laughing woman, and I saw the laughing began to bore him, I'd stop laughing and be—mysterious. Or if I was a sad-faced woman with tragic eyes, and he began to tire of tragedy—then I'd do a little comedy for him."

"Do comedy?"

"Yes."

"But—that wouldn't be natural, it would be *acting*," said the other.

Beechy laughed thoughtfully. "It would be natural," she said, "to me. Acting *is* natural to some people."

Wisdom beyond her years, but the logical outcome of the effect of her life on her particular nature. To her Camille, Lucrezia, Gilda, and the rest of them were real women, and she had learnt about women from them.

She slept for several hours after this conversation, and when she awoke the other girl had gone, gone for ever, but leaving a memory, and having been an instrument in Beechy's development, as we are all instruments in each other's development, inasmuch as she caused the girl to formulate an idea that had hitherto been merely a nebulous dream-thought.

Many people's dream-thoughts remain nebulous to their life's end, because formulative crystallisation never comes to them, and they go their way apparently theory-less.

Nothing much in the way of events broke the monotony of the long journey, until she found herself standing on a wharf looking at the first ship she had ever seen.

A magic thing with a network of ropes against a cold, blue sky, a thing that pulsed and groaned as it made ready to start on its journey, as if it feared the sea.

With her premature appreciation of the value of sensations, Beechy went below at once, and waited until the packet was well under way before she looked at the sea.

She sat in the stuffy little cabin, round which thrifty

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ladies were taking time by the forelock in the matter of lying-down places, for quite half an hour after the first strange pulse that the packet gave as it left the wharf.

Then she crept quietly up to the deck.

It was about two o'clock at night, and the moon shone bright in a cloud-filled sky.

Beechy walked up the deserted deck, and after shutting her eyes for a moment, took her first carefully hoarded look at the sea.

Her first feeling was one of intense disappointment. The horizon line was so near !

She had imagined a vastness not to be described, but this she had seen in the Campagna, and she felt cheated.

Then, as the ship throbbed its way in the silence, and clouds flitted across the moon, and the moon's light, fitful and strange, fell on the little, fine, crimped waves, it came to her, the Wonder of the Sea.

People who do not love the sea will not understand. People who do love the sea will need no words from me ; they will have to but close their eyes, and it will come back to them, the feeling that is part sadness, part exultation, part a never-ending amazement in and love of its beauty and responsiveness.

And this Beechy felt that first night as she made her curious little flight to her mother's country.

Her reasons for going to England would have been, had she attempted to give them, extremely vague. But she had made no attempt to explain even to herself her reason for this rather extraordinary step. When Father Antonio asked her why she was going, the kind old man had in his own mind a ready reason for her, and required no real answer. She was going because she wished to see her mother's people ; he returned the answer himself.

Signora Scarpia believed that she was going to claim from these wealthy British relations the education they in a remote way seemed to owe her. And there was something of truth in each of these theories.

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Perhaps in most of the theories that people make about each other's actions there is something of truth.

But—Beechy was going to England in the first place because her great-uncle had gone to India and Japan'; because the far-off country called her; because she had the roving drop of blood; because her time had come to fold her tent and start into the wilderness.

CHAPTER XX

BEECHY ARRIVES IN LONDON

THE first arrival of anyone in London is always an event worthy of description, although it has been done over and over again, and will be done over and over again until the end of writing.

George Ponderevo's advent in the old city, in Mr. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, is a marvel of deeply-felt description. Mr. Wells is as true a town-lover as was Charles Lamb or Dickens, and there is something of both of these old masters in the new master's manner.

Young George Ponderevo, a country-bred youth, saw London in one light—Beatrice Cavaleone, Roman citizen, saw it in another.

She arrived, in the first place, at Liverpool Street, and at eight in the morning.

It had been raining; but had turned cold, and as her cab made its way up Fleet Street, a fog crept out of the dark corners of the world, and spread itself out, saying to the little eager-eyed Roman, "Here, my dear young lady, is the *real* thing in the fog line."

And it was.

For the gods, true to their principle of sending to people the thing they dramatically require, sent Beechy that morning what an Olympian shopkeeper, dealing elements and weathers, would surely call "a most elegant thing in fogs." Down it came, or up, or out it came, growing yellower and yellower, hiding first the sharp corners of the buildings, then crawling down and up and round, until everything was lost and void.

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Now it so happened that Sister Caterina's one day in London had been just such a day as this. And naturally her impression of London was that of a southern peasapt who has been for twenty-four hours smothered in a steaming blanket.

Sister Caterina had not been enthusiastic about London.

As to Beechy, mark this.

Her entry into London was one of terror. The fog frightened her out of her wits. Huddled in her cab, she sat peering with hot eyes into the awful brown darkness that was gobbling the world.

London, the London she was to learn to know and love as very few Latins have ever known and loved it, met her in this wicked way.

"'Ave to go a bit slow 'ere, miss," remarked the cabby, a new horror, a disembodied voice in the obscurity.

The cab crawled on its way, and not one thing could Beechy see except dimly burning red lights now and again, and fragments like fragments from the antique, had she but known it, a head here, an arm there, a horse's ears thrust up towards her, followed by a dreadful grinding of wheels.

And Beechy in her hansom wept helplessly.

Near the Bank a policeman came and talked to her, but she, of course, could not understand him, and mutely held out the card with Mr. Pyecraft's address on it, as she had successfully done to the cabby.

The policeman's face went out as he tried to read the name. It was awful. It was like hell as pictured in an old book in Father Antonio's little library.

"Oh, Rome, oh, my beautiful, dear Rome, where the sun always shines!"

Presently the cabman drew up at the kerb, and dismounting from his invisible perch, waited for his fare to get out. "No use crying, miss," the man said. "No use in *hanythink*, as far as that goes. But I daren't go any farder. My 'oss is young, an' it ain't saife."

Beechy understood, and climbed obediently down. She

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understood that she was now deserted by even the cabman. And anything seemed better than creeping on in that endless line of invisible, noisy vehicles.

A chemist's shop near where they had stopped was throwing something like real light into the fog, and the cabman, after a short altercation, persuaded a ragged man with an awful face, such as Beechy had never seen in all her life among ragged people, to drag her little box across the pavement to the shop.

Beechy opened her purse. She had a pound in shillings, but she had meant to ask her Aunt Augusta how much she ought to pay.

The cabman looked at her as she hesitated. He was a seedy cabman and a thirsty one, as his nose testified. But he was a kind cabman too.

When she offered her little store to him, he held up two stumpy red fingers and made a little speech about his own inherent qualities.

She paid him without a word and went into the shop.

Messrs. Thatcher and Gubbins, the chemists, were both much surprised by the self-possessed advent into their shop of a tall, strange-looking girl, and a small, brass-nailed box.

"Good morning, miss," began Gubbins, whose natural gifts had elevated him, although the junior partner, into the position of leader where customers were concerned.

"*Gmahna*," returned Beechy civilly, this being the form in which the words, obviously a greeting, reached her ears. "*Gmahna*."

"What can I do for you this morning——?"

"*Non parlo Inglese*," she answered him firmly. Her fears had vanished the moment her foot touched the ground; she was afraid of no mere tangible man, particularly when he was a shopkeeper, and had no chin at all, unless it had slipped down into a place of concealment behind his high collar.

"I beg your pardon——"

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"*Non parlo Inglese. Sono Italiana*," she repeated, her eye fixed on his in a way that made him feel, Briton though he was, and a Briton in his own shop, a mere interloper.

"*Italiana*—ah, yes, just so, Italian! Dear me, miss, I am afraid we can't be of much use to you here—ah, Thatcher?"

Thatcher shook his head. "Sit down, miss," he said, adding to the chinless one, "Poor girl, she's lost in the fog. And no wonder, Gilbert, just look at it. Hi, boy, close that door, will you?"

The errand boy jumped violently, and did as he was bidden.

Meantime Beechy had sat down and was sitting quietly, her hands folded.

She was waiting for the fog to go away.

The two men watched her for about five minutes.

"Probably just come from Liverpool Street, Tom," suggested Mr. Gubbins.

Thatcher nodded.

"And probably dying for a cup of tea—eh, Gil?"

Thus Beechy, busy with the aria in the first act of "*Aida*" was awakened to real life by that horrid incident, her first cup of tea.

Thanking the genial Gubbins, she stirred the strange-looking liquid, and tasted it with wariness.

"Ugh!" she said frankly.

She tried it again, nipping at the side of the cup like a rabbit investigating a new leaf.

No, it was very nasty.

"Thanks," she said, "but I don't need it. I am not ill."

And she gave it back to the young man, whose indignation was intense.

"By Jove, Tom!"

Beechy smiled at him, and he forgave her.

"Perhaps they don't drink tea in Italy," he suggested, and Mr. Thatcher agreed; "Perhaps they don't."

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At the end of the first hour a customer came in, an old woman with toothache.

She looked curiously at the motionless figure in the chair, but she said nothing.

The next person to come, however, was a little doctor who wished to make some complaint about the making up of an ointment that he had prescribed for one of his patients.

"You fellows don't mix your ointments well enough," he said; "that's what *I* complain of, you don't mix 'em—Hello, what's this?"

He had caught sight of Beechy, and he bristled with curiosity.

"It's—a lady who came in out of the fog," explained Thatcher. "An Italian——"

"Out of the fog! The fog is going to last for hours."

"Then she'll probably stay for hours," put in Gubbins humorously. Beechy looked up.

"Do you speak Italian?" she asked in her own language.

"Blowed if I do," puffed the little doctor, his grizzled beard in his hand.

"Rum-looking young woman, isn't she? Well—about that ointment. You fellows don't mix enough. Ichthyol needs the deuce of a lot of mixin'——"

Beechy, back in Egypt, was singing mutely.

"La nelle foreste vergine, di fiori profumati——"

Her silent rendering of the lingering, poetic words gave to her face a look of the utmost pathos.

Poor little Ethiopian princess, sighing for her virgin forests and scented flowers, how well she, Beechy, could feel it here in this awful country where clouds fell out of the sky into the streets, and it was night by day.

"Then under my sky——"

Her eyebrows pathetically arched over wide-opened

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eyes, she went over the words, learning the lovely music, feeling it.

"I say, Gil, just look at 'er," whispered Mr. Thatcher.

"Mad," affirmed Mr. Gubbins, "mad as an 'atter."

But mad or not, she seemed harmless enough, and sat with an appalling quietude in her corner until after half-past eleven.

Then, when the fog had resolved itself into a mere haggard ghost of its former monstrous self, she rose, and pointed through the window.

"She means it's clearing——"

Beechy then went through a pantomime. First she trotted like a horse, her head down, but tossed and dragged at by imaginary reins.

Then she pretended to lift her box and deposit it on the top of a hansom.

Then she took her purse and opened it.

Mr. Gubbins' mirth was unrestrained.

"My word, what a girl! Look at that, Tom, she's lifting up her box——"

Thatcher nodded to Beechy. "All right," he said, "I understand. Boy, fetch a hansom."

The hansom was fetched; Beechy gravely watched the hoisting of her box, and then, turning, she bowed to the two men.

"*Grazie*," she said, pointing to the chair, "*Grazie tanto*."

Then, still quite seriously, she pointed to her heart.

"She means thanks," babbled Gubbins; "she means she is grateful——"

Beechy shook hands with them, and after showing the address to the cabby, got into the hansom and went her way.

The fog had gone, and the little horse jogged rapidly along over the greasy streets.

For an hour and a half they kept on their way, through New Oxford Street into Holborn, along the Strand, up Piccadilly to the Brompton Road.

BEECHY ARRIVES IN LONDON

Miles and miles and miles of shops. More shops than she dreamed could be in the whole world. Thousands and thousands of people, all serious, all hurrying to some place, whither, apparently, they did not like to go.

The jog, jog of the absurd little vehicle (she had chosen a hansom rather than a four-wheeler because the grotesqueness of the two-wheeled thing appealed to her imagination) seemed to hypnotise her, and after a time the streets, endless and crowded, became to her like a pantomime, like a sordid, unlovely ballet danced to the dull music of the traffic.

And this was the wonderful London where people were so rich !

Once the hansom stopped with a jerk to let a troop of soldiers march by, and a woman with a baby came and begged of Beechy, who gave her a copper. A wretched, degraded-looking woman, who smelt very evilly indeed, and who lurched unevenly away, into the swinging doors of a very grand-looking shop of some kind with no shop windows.

Beechy shivered.

It was a new kind of poverty to her. •In Rome there were and are, Heaven knows, beggars enough. But there they cause either pity or anger in the minds of those they accost ; rarely, if ever, physical disgust. This drunken slut, child of our vaunted Anglo-Saxon civilisation, filled the little Italian with loathing.

At last the cab turned into Hartismere Road, in Fulham, and stopped at Number 57.

CHAPTER XXI

AUNT AUGUSTA

NUMBER 57 Hartismere Road is that enviable thing a corner house.

It is built of brick, has a bow window, and in front of it is a small garden bisected by a brick path edged with large, pink-lipped sea-shells that spent their youth on some southern, white-sanded shore.

On the green front door is a brass plate engraved with the name Henry Pyecraft, and the fanlight over the door is stretched with crimson silk.

The cuckoo-clock in the dining-room had just struck two, and the grandfather clock by the dining-room door in the little linoleum-covered hall was going to strike two in about seven minutes—which for the grandfather clock was not doing badly.

The little house was very quiet ; it smelt of cabbage, of Irish stew, of furniture-polish.

From the kitchen came a very faint occasional sound as Amelia moved about, cleaning up after dinner.

Henry Pyecraft himself sat by the dining-room fire, his handkerchief over his head, sleeping, his hands folded loosely over his large round waistcoat.

Polly pecked occasionally at the bars of her cage, but this little sound, like that of Amelia's movements in the kitchen, like the smell of food and varnish, was an integral part of the St. Augustine's afternoon, and did not disturb the slumber of the owner of the house.

Opposite the old brown rocking-chair in which Mr. Pyecraft sat, stood a low round arm-chair covered with faded

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blue chintz, and on a small table near it stood a work-basket, a gilt-edged book, and a spectacle case.

Mrs. Pyecraft's corner, now empty, while its owner took her quotidian rest upstairs in the nuptial chamber.

The dining-table still had its white cover, and on it stood several piles of clean plates, two very ugly glass and silver épergnes full of small cakes, and at the end near the window stood a brand-new basket-work cake-stand, its little shelves yawning for bread and butter.

The walls of the dining-room were of a highly genteel dark blue, touched up with silver; they were adorned with a portrait (done after death from a photograph) of Mr. Pyecraft's mother, a forbidding old woman with a gold chain on her stony bosom; a steel engraving of the signing of the Reform Bill, and a highly coloured lithograph of a young woman in a flying red robe, clinging desperately to a granite cross, at the feet of which dashed the white-crested waves of a very green and oily sea.

The mahogany sideboard was heavily carved, and on it stood a flowered soup-tureen, an old-fashioned silver cake-basket, and two tall vases of the hideous, sinister type usually produced in old-fashioned hotels for the accommodation of unexpected bouquets. The carpet was nearly covered by an unbleached drugget.

A cab passing in the street, Polly gave vent to a hoarse bark, and Mr. Pyecraft moved uneasily, knocking his big foot against the brass fender.

Tick-tock-tick-tock—from the passage came the big, soft strokes of the clock, one, two.

"I think," came from under the red handkerchief, "that I'll 'ave another go at that clock."

Mr. Pyecraft rose slowly, stretched his arms, rubbed his genial-looking red nose, and went out into the passage, leaving the door open, so that he might have light.

He was a very big old man with a bald head fringed with stiff white hair, small grey eyes that twinkled, and

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a kind, humorous mouth, beneath which his chin ran away towards his neck.

He wore black clothes, and across his broad waistcoat stretched a gold watch-chain of a very ornate description indeed.

On his shuffling feet he wore large red plush slippers embroidered in purple pansies.

"If," Mr. Pyecraft said solemnly to the clock, "you *could* manage to keep time with 'er cuckoo, you'd save me an awful lot of trouble!"

He spoke in a hushed voice, and the clock paid no attention whatever to him, as he thrust its big black minute hand to that place in its face where the cuckoo insisted it ought to be.

The old man looked into the dining-room and gave a sort of suppressed wink at the cuckoo.

"Satisfied *now*?" he asked that tyrannical timepiece. Then he lumbered up the passage to the door, just inside which lay a catalogue in a fresh wrapper.

"Sutton's!"

As he stooped to pick it up a pull at the bell startled him so that he nearly fell down, and with a jerk he opened the door.

Beechy looked at him.

"Signor 'Enry Peecroft?" asked the girl, her eyes fixed on his.

And poor Pyecraft knew by that word "Signor" who she was, and that his sin had found him out.

To her amazement it appeared that the peculiarities of England extended to the very way the inhabitants of that black country received their guests. For Pyecraft, instead of inviting her in, stepped out on to the doorstep, closing the door softly after him.

"Beatrice Cavaleone," he said, mispronouncing her beautiful name most ludicrously, "poor Carrie's girl?"

Beechy nodded, holding out both her hands to him. He took them, and bending, imprinted a hasty kiss on her cheek.

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So he was friendly, in spite of the closed door. Beechy, tired and hungry, pointed to her mouth, and chewed imaginary food. He nodded, still kindly, but evidently in great terror.

What could it be ?

Ah, she knew, somebody ill !

"*È malata la Zia Augusta ?*" she asked, pointing towards the upper window.

"Yes, yes, Augusta ! Yes, my dear. I am delighted to see you, but you see I 'aven't mentioned you to her——" he stammered.

Beechy, after a moment's hesitation, slipped off her shoes and began prowling up and down the brick walk with exaggerated precautions of silence, one finger on the lips. "*Zitto, zitto,*" she whispered in a voice that no one could have failed to understand to mean hush.

Poor Pycraft watched her in an agony. Suppose Augusta should look down out of the window to find him watching a very handsome young woman a-doing pantomime in the front garden in her stocking feet !

He shivered. "Oh, lor ! w'atever shall I do ?" he moaned, rubbing his head in the manner of many perplexed old men. Beechy paused and looked inquiringly at him. Then, as he did not move, she opened the door softly, and, her finger still on her lips, went in, he following her in the guilt of despair.

She opened the door on her left, and he followed her into the front parlour. She was, it seemed to him, a born leader. How else should she know that this grand apartment was the last place in the house where his wife would look for him ?

"Oh, *bello !*" exclaimed the girl in genuine admiration, as her eyes fell on the crimson-and-black furniture, and the soft, medallioned carpet.

"*Bel salone !*"

"Yes, it's a handsome room," he agreed dully, "but——"

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Beechy sat down on the plush sofa. Then she rose, and removing a small red-and-white crocheted mat from a large gilt book on the marble centre-table, opened the book.

"Ah! *Gesù Cristo*," she exclaimed, with the eagerness of one meeting an old friend in a strange land. And she crossed herself carelessly.

Pyecraft's legs flageoletted under him, as the French say, and he sank quite flabbily and weak into a chair.

"To be a-naming of 'I'm like that, every-day-like, and oh, my God, to make a cross! It'll be the death of Augusta."

Beechy, having glanced through the Bible, next opened a volume of Mrs. Hemans' poems, and then walking round the room, submitted that proud apartment to a rapid, though admiring, survey.

The drawing-room suite seemed to her very beautiful indeed, with its stripes of hollowed gilding in the wood, and the silk plush of its upholstery.

There was also, on a gilt table in the bow window, a glass case, under which reposed three stuffed canaries on a glistening tropical tree, with feathery foliage. The windows were draped in lace- and red-cloth curtains, edged with ball fringe, and in one corner of the room, ornamented with two blue vases filled with dried pampas grass and everlasting flowers, stood a strange, ornate wooden thing like a piano, and yet mysteriously not a piano! Like an organ, and yet not an organ.

To this Beechy went, and laying her hand on its lid, found that it rose.

It *was* a piano, though above the keyboard was a row of pegs that she did not understand. She could not play a note, but instinctively she touched the keys, and, to her horror, they were dumb!

Her hand flew to her throat as if it had refused to give forth a sound, and in rapid Italian she asked Pyecraft what was the matter.

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"Oh, don't, don't!" he moaned, his head in his hand. For he had heard in the room above the sound of a light firm foot, and he knew that Augusta would any moment be coming down to prepare for her tea-party.

Beechy tried the piano again, and then deciding that it was, after all, an organ, examined the wall about it for the thing to pump air into it. There was nothing!

To his horror she lay down on the floor and tried to see under the thing.

And it was at this moment that the door opened and Mrs. Pyecraft came in.

To his dying day Pyecraft could see the scene. Beechy as flat as a spatchcock on the flowered floor, peering under the pedals of the harmonium, Augusta, a silver *épergne* full of cakes in each hand, staring at the girl. At last she spoke.

"'Enry!" she said, and that was all.

Beechy scrambled to her knees, her hands still on the floor, looked up and smiled. Then she rose, and brushing her hands together, went to Mrs. Pyecraft, and before the astonished woman could protest, had kissed her soundly on both cheeks.

"'Enry! Who is this—this—person?"

Pyecraft pressed his handkerchief to his streaming brow.

"It isn't a person, my dear," he said vacantly, "it's poor Carrie's girl from Italy."

"Carrie's girl——"

"Yes. She's an Italian. She's come from Italy."

"'Old your tongue, 'Enry. And you, miss," she added, trembling with rage, setting down the *épergne* with a loud bang, "you go."

Beechy, supposing her offence to have consisted in lying on the floor to examine this unusual aunt's piano-organ-thing, smiled deprecatingly.

"I'm sorry," she said; "I'll never do it again."

Then spying the cakes, she went to the table, and point-

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ing to her mouth, rubbed her stomach gently, in a way that was realistic, but not at all vulgar.

Mrs. Pyecraft gasped, and Beechy, half-starving, gave way to temptation, and helped herself to a large dark cake that was bursting with plums.

"Don't be too 'ard on 'er, Augusta, my—my love. She is very 'ungry, you see. And she is Carrie's girl."

"How do you know she is, 'Enry Pyecraft? The best thing you can do, I should say, would be to tell me all about it."

Poor Pyecraft did not feel that anything he could do deserved the qualification of "best," or even "good." But with the eager docility of the thoroughly henpecked, he confessed.

"She wrote to me, you see, my dear, 'aving found some—some letters I wrote to poor Carrie after her—her unfortunate marriage."

"Oh! So you wrote to her *after* her marriage, did you? You never mentioned *that* little fact before. Well, go on."

Mrs. Pyecraft was a small, thin woman, with a thin nose and thin lips. Everything about her, mentally as well as physically, was thin.

Her hair was grey behind, and a rich brown in front, and her little eyes, like gimlets, were of a cold grey.

A very unpleasant woman, Mrs. Pyecraft, although she was for some reasons regarded by all the "Connection" as something like a saint.

And of all her qualities, the one that most terrified her poor easy-going husband was a trick she had of slowly nodding her head as he talked to her.

Back and forward it moved now as he told Beechy's story, so that he had, at one moment, a full view of the top of her head, the next of a long yellow throat. This rhythmic movement caught Beechy's eye as she munched her cake, and the girl burst out laughing.

"She does the mandarin," she cried joyously to her-

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self, "like the china mandarin in Signora Scarpia's *salottino*!"

"Hush," pleaded Pyecraft, with a sidelong glance at her; "your aunt is talking."

"Her aunt, indeed. I am not her aunt."

"But you are, Augusta. You may—we may decide to send her away, but you can't change the fact of your being her aunt."

"Very good. I am her aunt, then," she agreed ominously, with that sudden change of front that makes women such dangerous adversaries. "I am her aunt. You are not her uncle. So I can do what I like with my own niece. And what I like is this. Come, you——"

Taking Beechy by the sleeve she pulled her towards the door.

If Mr. William Tozer, buttermilkman, of No. 7 Shorrals Road, had not dropped his clay pipe as he left his house that afternoon, Beechy's life would have been very different from what it actually became.

By dropping his pipe, and returning to his room to get another, it so fell out that Mr. Tozer met the Reverend Mr. Perkins, and the two men walked together up Shorrals Road to Hartismere Road.

Mr. Perkins was on his way to make a call at the end of Hartismere Road. If he had not met Mr. Tozer he would have gone there.

But the conversation with the buttermilkman interested him, and he turned to the left at the angle of the two roads, and walked on with him for five minutes.

"Very well, then, Mr. Tozer, I will come, and thank you very much——"

They parted, and Mr. Perkins, who felt the fog in his bones, hesitated for a moment at the gate of St. Augustine's, and then, well knowing that his coming too early would be considered an honour by Mrs. Pyecraft, went briskly up the brick path, and rang the bell.

CHAPTER XXII

A TEA-PARTY AND A HAM-BONE

MRS. PYECRAFT'S hand relaxed on Beechy's shoulder as the bell rang.

"See who it is, 'Enry," she said sharply.

Beechy did not move. There was to her something amusing in the scene.

This little black-silk woman, whom she could have knocked down by a sudden movement, was so utterly mistress of the situation.

Pyecraft was over a head taller than his wife, yet there he stood, wordless, terrified. Beechy herself was not terrified; indeed, it seemed to her somehow appropriate to the general strangeness of inhospitable, foggy *Inghilterra*, that her mother's diminutive shrew of a sister should thus be marching her to the door with a view to ignominiously casting her out.

Pyecraft, opening the door to the extent of two inches, and peering out, gave a sudden gasp and fell back, the door still in his hand.

• Stood revealed a square-built man in black, with a grizzling beard and the affable smile of one accustomed to warm welcomes and ready cups of tea.

"Good afternoon, my dear Mrs. Pyecraft. I come early, but I have been working hard all day, and I am weary, weary. I have come to beg you to let me rest in your kind home until our dear brothers and sisters arrive——"

Mrs. Pyecraft, perforce, lowered her hand from Beechy's shoulder and advanced towards her minister.

"Mr. Perkins—I am delighted," she stammered.

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"'Enry, will you take Mr. Perkins into the dining-room——?"

Mr. Perkins hung up his hat and top-coat on the glossy, brown hat-rack at the right of the door.

Then, as he was about to follow poor Pyecraft, whose agony of soul was visibly expressed in his pallid face, Beechy's good angel, at that time in unfailing attendance on her, put a sudden idea into the minister's mind.

"And this dear young lady," he asked, kindly turning towards Beechy, "another young sister whom I have not yet seen?"

Pyecraft drew up his collar with a jerk and cleared his throat. If he hesitated now, Beechy would be put out the moment he had obeyed his wife and closed the dining-room door. And, poor man, he had loved pretty Carrie Smith years ago. He drew a quick breath and answered before the minister's smile of amazement had died from his face.

"This is a niece of my dear wife's," he answered in a louder voice than usual. "She is an Italian, and 'as come to visit us."

He paused, but the roof did not fall. Nothing happened.

Mr. Perkins beamed and held out his hand to Beechy, who created a timely diversion by kissing it. She saw that he was a power in the land, and the kiss was one of propitiation.

But the good man blushed and coughed nervously, and Pyecraft nearly fainted.

To his wife, the minister's good opinion was worth more than nearly anything in the world, and here was her niece, whom she could no longer repudiate, disgracing herself by kissing his hand!

"Excuse her, Mr. Perkins," she said, coughing behind her own hand, "she doesn't speak a word of English, nor understand our ways. She's only just come."

The minister bowed graciously. "She will learn, Mrs.

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Pyecraft, she will learn from *you*," he said graciously. "And now, Mr. Pyecraft, if you will let me rest by the fire——"

Thus Mrs. Pyecraft and Beechy were left alone. For several seconds there was a silence. Then Mrs. Pyecraft said with a snap, "Is that your box?"

She pointed as she spoke. Beechy nodded.

"*Amelia!*"

There was another pause, during which a strange muffled bird-call reached them. Beechy laughed aloud, then, pursing her lips, reproduced with extraordinary fidelity the sound of her aunt's favourite clock.

"Whatever——" began Amelia, the cook-general, appearing at the kitchen door at the far end of the passage. "You 'aven't moved the cuckoo-clock?"

Beechy, seeing her surprise, gave the call again, and Amelia burst out laughing.

"This is—my niece, Amelia," said Mrs. Pyecraft. "'Elp 'er carry 'er box upstairs, will you?"

But Amelia had not bargained for nieces.

"I didn't know you 'ad nieces," she said.

"Well, I *have*."

Amelia was large, and her red, glossy-elbowed arms were muscular. But the muscle in Mrs. Pyecraft's little pale tongue outmatched her.

After a moment's hesitation she took up her end of the box, Beechy took up the other, and the two tramped up two flights of narrow stairs to a small room under the roof.

"You've come, and I 'ope you'll like it," said the cook-general venomously; "but you'll 'ave to do your own work. I ain't a-goin' to work for you."

Beechy looked at her, and then very quietly swore at her in fluent Roman street-language.

Amelia stared. "Well, I *never*! Whatever's that you're talking?" she said.

Beechy swore on, using words and phrases of which she had not thought since her *gamin* days.

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At last Amelia fled in confusion.

The room was small and very shabby, more a box-room than a bedroom.

There was a bed, but there were also several trunks and boxes in the far end of it, and there was no cupboard of any kind, nor any looking-glass. A dreadful room it would have seemed to anyone in the least fastidious, but to Beechy it was a room, it contained a bed, and that was all that was necessary.

She sat down by the window, her back to it, and reviewed the position in which she found herself.

Her aunt disliked her for some reason. Her aunt was a devil, so that did not matter.

Signor Peecroft was kind. He was a good old man, but evidently quite secondary in the household.

"He is a wet hen," she said.

The servant did not like her, but the servant was obviously an animal.

At least there was a roof over her, and a bed for her to sleep in.

"They will have to give me food, too," she reckoned shrewdly, "if the Old Bearded One stays. She fears the Old Bearded One."

The little low window was shrouded by a grey cotton curtain hung on a rusty wire. Beechy threw back the curtain, and then drew a long breath.

For before her spread the panorama of chimney-pots that has for some people so much of a strange poetry of its own. Before her and on all sides, chimneys, smoking and silent. Brick chimneys, and iron ones. Miles of them, a vast plateau of slate and iron and brick, and little odd windows trying to blink in a pale little sunbeam that was trying to force its way through the heavy air.

Nearly opposite Beechy a row of geraniums glowed, growing in tins. Strings of faded, shabby clothes hung out to dry here and there, a grey cat minced daintily along over the tiles away to the left.

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Beechy was used to roofs, but in Rome no two houses are of the same level, and there are no iron chimney-pots. In Rome roof-landscape is one of mountains and valleys, of precipitous walls, of beautiful garlanded windows, of splendid domes and towers whose bells boom across the silence, of fluted russet tiles, of sudden bits of garden, whose velvety cypresses prick the sky.

It is romantic, beautiful, and Beechy loved it. But this London—here roofs were ugly, sordid, piteous, they were flat, uniform, dirty, and yet they had a strange and potent charm, not unlike the charm of a vast plain.

As Beechy watched, an old woman came and watered the geraniums out of a broken teapot, and then moved them all to the inside of the window.

A white cat ran out of a dark place behind a cluster of rusty chimneys; a child's voice, screaming loudly, rent the air.

It was life; the life of the roofs, and Beechy drew a deep breath, for she felt its charm and loved it.

"Well, I suppose you might as well come down——"

Mrs. Pyecraft stood beside her. "Oh, you 'aven't unpacked. Well——" Beechy smiled at her.

A moment later and she had opened her box. Mrs. Pyecraft very ungraciously pulled out Beechy's best frock, a dark red woollen thing, and in dumb show ordered her to put it on.

After a hasty wash in cold water the girl smoothed her hair and obeyed, after which she followed her ungente relation downstairs.

Mr. Perkins was now installed in the front parlour, and, to Pyecraft's relief, another guest had arrived.

This was Mrs. Batter, a wealthy widow, a person of vast importance in the Connection.

"Ah, and here is our dear young sister—what did you say her name was?" broke off Mr. Perkins, as Beechy came in.

"Beatrice, Beatrice Cavaleon," answered Pyecraft

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hastily, but Beechy smiled and corrected him, her hand on his arm. "Be-a-tri-cé Ca-va-lé-o-né," she pronounced syllabically, in her pretty soft voice.

"A German, I dessay," commented Mrs. Batter, with a much-travelled air.

"Italian. She's only just arrived. Come for a visit," elucidated Mrs. Pyecraft, "a very short visit."

Other guests arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Lacy, a kind pair who went in for pigeon-fancying, and whose only son was working in China as a missionary; Mrs. Clapp and her two daughters, serious-minded young women with weak eyes; Mr. and Mrs. Little, the successors to Mr. Pyecraft's drapery business, very old friends of the Pyecrafts.

They sat down and ate.

Beechy, who was bidden to hand round the cake, did so in a fury of thwarted hunger. There was tea, and Mr. Perkins himself offered her a cup, but she remembered her experience of the morning, and refused.

She ate two slices of bread and butter, but her aunt's repellent eye stopped her as she was about to take more, and hunger tore at her vitals.

More guests. Mr. and Mrs. Chubb, a bride and groom, she very elegant in new clothes, an ermine tippet made of cat round her neck, a gold watch suspended in the middle of her chest.

Mr. Chubb was the wit of the congregation, and his most serious observation was met with mirth.

The fact that Beechy spoke no English so amused him that he nearly split with laughter, to use his own favourite phrase.

"No English! Then what does she speak?" he asked. Then approaching the girl, who stood looking at him, wondering if he were half-witted, he said, "Let's try her in Chinese—Mick—Mack—mee, Keechy—weechy!"

Everybody was delighted and laughed heartily, while Mrs. Chubb suppressed her pride as best she could.

Beechy, flushing crimson, moved back a few steps,

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looking at the buffoon with brilliantly visible disdain. "*Imbecille*," she said.

The party was a great success.

Even Mr. Porter, the eccentric Mr. Porter, who lived at "The Willows," and kept two servants, appeared at about six o'clock, and he ate several cakes and drank more tea than anyone except Mr. Perkins, whose prowess in that direction was renowned, and a favourite subject of tenderest chaff by his more intimate lady friends.

At last the last guest had gone, accompanied to the door by both host and hostess.

"Well," began Mr. Pyecraft with a sigh of content, "I call that a very pleasant party. Never was a nicer one; my dear, Mr. Perkins 'ad six cups and Mr. Porter four and a half. Them little round cakes are——"

Mrs. Pyecraft interrupted him. "Where's that girl?" she asked in the tone she would have used if asking, Where is that boa-constrictor?

Beechy was nowhere to be seen. No; Amelia had not seen her. Amelia had been in the dining-room, working.

After a short search Beechy was found in her own room. By her, on a table, stood a plate containing bread-crumbs, and, oh, horror, a ham-bone denuded of its last shred of meat!

And by the plate a little pile of money, at which the girl gravely pointed, after indicating, with a dramatic wave of her hand, the ham-bone.

"She 'as eaten the 'am we were to have had for supper," gasped her aunt.

"Poor child—look—she wants us to take money for it! No, no, my dear, an' you're welcome to the 'am," he hastily added, pushing the money away. •

"I dessay she was 'ungry," supplemented his wife, a trifle ashamed of herself. "A nice kettle of fish you've got us into, 'Enry Pyecraft!"

CHAPTER XXIII

ABOUT AURELIO

IT is well known that Cavaleone never spoke really good English. Her marvellous memory of course contributed to her having an excellent and extensive vocabulary, but her musical ear was from the first at fault when applied to the mastery of the pronunciation of the language. French she acquired easily, and a fair amount of German, but she could never learn to end words quite clearly without a consonant, and "jh" was always an insurmountable barrier to her.

That her "h's" were always unsteady she owed, of course, largely to the fact that her first years in England were passed among the excellent people of Hartismere Road.

For, in spite of Mrs. Pyecraft's objections, she stayed on at St. Augustine's.

One spring day, some two years after her arrival at that house, she was sitting with her aunt in the back garden. Their chairs and a small table stood on a square of old carpet under a very dingy plane tree, whose shabby branches, as if ashamed of their poverty-stricken aspect, were hurrying to clothe themselves in a new green garment.

The little garden was a pleasant place enough, and Uncle 'Emy's cheery whistling, as he bent over his beloved cucumber-frame, sounded very pleasant to Beechy.

"But why you keep me then?" she asked, glancing up from her work, a brown sock which she was darning.

"What could I do?" returned her aunt. "There was your uncle telling Mr. Perkins who you were—there was nothing else for it."

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Beechy nodded, sympathetically rather than otherwise, and allowed her eyes to rest for a moment on the delicious rosy snow of an apple tree growing in the next garden.

"I don't wonder you no like—a——"

"Who'd a-liked it I'm sure I don't know. But there, you stayed, and when you behave yourself, and don't do awful things, I reely don't mind you much." Mrs. Pyecraft spoke, for her, rather graciously.

"They're coming on, 'Gusta," shouted Mr. Pyecraft, standing up and rubbing his aching back. "The cukes, I mean. This sun is just what they wanted——"

He loved his garden, the good man, and that very afternoon had unbound the straw that had protected his rhubarb roots from the long winter frosts.

There were herbaceous borders round the little enclosure, and lettuce also, "coming on" under the kitchen windows. Beechy's patch of violets were doing well, and their glossy green leaves already hid several buds.

Overhead the sky was as blue and clear as if it had never heard of smoke and fog.

Beechy squared her mouth, and gave several little snorting cries up and down the scale.

"Voice all right," she said contentedly. "I was afraid last night I was going to have cold. Aurelio would *walk*."

"*H'm!*"

"Why you say '*h'm*,' aunt? Because Aurelio would walk?"

The sun shone full in her lustrous eyes as she looked at the old woman, giving to her a peculiarly innocent look.

"You are treating Aurelio very badly, Beechy."

"Bah! Aurelio understand me. You remember, aunt, that first night when he came? Without Aurelio I died, then."

"I certainly *do* remember that evening, and 'ow badly you behaved. A big girl like you to kiss 'im like that."

"But—I was so glad to see him—an Italian! To

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hear Italian spoken, to speak with 'im ! Of course I kiss 'im ! ”

“ *H'm !* 'Enry, I wish you'd leave that tiresome cucumber-frame, and come and talk to me—or rather, to Beechy.”

Henry obeyed, as usual, at once, and stood before her a humble, earthy, shirt-sleeved old man.

“ I'm telling 'er that she 'adn't ought to carry on so with Aurelio, 'Enry. And she won't listen to me at all. She never will.”

“ But, aunt, I always listen,” protested Beechy, looking more injured than she could possibly have felt.

“ 'E meets 'er every day after 'er lesson and brings 'er 'ome.”

“ Bringing 'er 'ome isn't wrong, Augusta ! ”

“ Yesterday they went to the ' Pop ' for tea. And to-night they are going to the opera.”

“ To 'ear the new tenor in 'Aïda,' ” put in Beechy. “ Think of it, Uncle 'Enry ! ”

Old Pyecraft scratched his head thoughtfully.

“ You know, my dear,” he ventured to his wife, “ that I don't 'old by opera-going ! And you know that I did my best to persuade 'er to give up singing and take up the dressmaking. But—I failed, as even you and Mr. Perkins did. And there—well, we—we gave in, didn't we, my love ? ”

Beechy watched her old champion lovingly, and gave a little jump as her aunt declared firmly :

“ I *never* gave in, never. To see my own flesh and blood a-going to perdition is—is not pleasant for me, 'Enry, and consent I do not nor will not. But Aurelio answered for Seenior Bucini, knowing 'is wife and all, so I can bear the lessons. It's this opera-goin' that I object to. And with Aurelio, too ! ”

Beechy tossed her pair of socks into the basket, and took up a long black stocking.

“ You would not want me to go alone ? ” she asked,

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making a face at the damages she had to repair as she drew the stocking over her hand.

"I don't care about going with Aurelio! I'll take Annie instead, if she'll swear not to eat during the singing."

"My dear, surely it is better to 'ave Aurelio take 'er? Young women—Annie's still young—ought not to go alone to a theatre. And Aurelio——"

"Aurelio is over 'is ears in love with 'er, 'Enry Pyecraft, you silly old bat, and there you 'ave the truth," she flashed out furiously.

Beechy shrugged her shoulders. "Poor Aurelio—*si, è vero*, 'e loves me. And—why not? Besides, it is not new. Ever since *that Sunday* 'e loves me."

She made this statement quite unemotionally, and there was a short pause, for that Sunday was a day dreadful in the annals of St. Augustine's.

It was the occasion of Beechy's first appearance at chapel, a dull Sunday a fortnight after her precipitous arrival in Hartismere Road.

Clad in a hideous brown frock chosen by Mrs. Pyecraft, the girl sat quietly enough in her place, watching the members of the congregation, the bare walls, the wooden rostrum.

Mr. Perkins prayed, and Beechy counted the heads in front of her.

This was a strange place in which to pray. No pictures, no statues, not even a crucifix.

* In place of a beautiful altar, an ugly table; instead of a gorgeous, solemn-voiced priest, Mr. Perkins.

Beechy said an *Ave* and two *Paters*.

Then a cracked harmonium began to wheeze out a hymn, and the brothers and sisters to sing.

Now it so happened that the cook-general at St. Augustine's was a songstress, and that this hymn, "There is a Fountain filled with blood," was her favourite. So Beechy, who had heard it sung loudly every day during the past fortnight, knew the tune perfectly.

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Straightening her back, she drew a long breath and joined in the singing.

Of course she did not know the words, but she knew an Italian ballad (anything but hymn-like in sentiment), the rhythm of which fitted to the music of the hymn.

At first she sang unnoticed, but after the first few bars her voice rose and soared.

"There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins——"

The brothers and sisters paused, the five gifted ones who, sitting by the harmonium, composed the choir, continued doughtily for a moment, and then severally straggled into silence.

"'And those who plunged within that flood,'" sang Beechy, her beautiful young voice filling the dingy place as irreverently as that of a nightingale would have done, her Italian words melodious and human, "'Lose all their guilty stains.'"

The organist, who afterwards pleaded a kind of maiming hypnotism as her excuse for not stopping, played on, and Beechy continued, gaining confidence with every note, her voice acquiring timbre and fulness.

Even Mrs. Pyecraft could not make a move towards stopping her until she was half-way through the second stanza.

Then, right in the middle of a wonderfully clear high note, Mrs. Pyecraft clutched the singer and gave her a violent jerk.

"Stop, you wicked girl," she gasped, "stop at once. You are shaming us all——"

Beechy shook her away, in amazement, but then, as she saw the faces of the congregation, and even Mr. Perkins, as they waked up to the enormity of her offence, she faltered and stopped, her voice ceasing like a dying voice.

Mr. Pyecraft was white with horror, but to her relief the restored organist again began to play, and the stricken people to sing.

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Beechy stepped over her uncle, and went out into the dull daylight.

At the door, just as Mrs. Pyecraft reached her, stood a young man.

"Who sang '*Stella del cuor mio*'?" he asked abruptly, and Beechy, with a sound between a sob and a laugh, pointed to herself.

"*Io!*" she said.

"Excuse me, madame," the youth went on to the old woman, "but—to be passing a chapel in Fulham, and to hear an Italian poem sung to a hymn—I—it was strange."

"Very strange, indeed. And very disgraceful," returned Mrs. Pyecraft. "Come, Beechy."

But Beechy clasped her hands.

"I live at 57 Hartismere Road," she said pleadingly in Italian. "You must come and see me. I die in this awful country—I die——"

"She asks me to come to see her," explained the young man with instantaneous tact, "because she cannot speak English. My name, madame, is Aurelio Ruffo, and I am a goldsmith. I work at Leffingwell's, in the Racton Road, if you will kindly make inquiries. Possibly, if you will allow me to call on you, I may be able to be of assistance to you——"

Mrs. Pyecraft, indignant though she was with Beechy, yet saw that the civil young man was right. He might indeed be of use.

So very sourly she told him that her husband would come to see Mr. Leffingwell.

Then they parted, and Beechy did not in the least mind the steady flow of invective that was directed at her on their homeward way. For, thanks be to the Madonna, a Christian was coming to see her!

This, in brief, is the history of the day known to them always as "that Sunday."

They all thought of it that other day, two years later,

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when Mrs. Pyecraft appealed to her husband against the opera-going.

• "So you know he is in love with you!"

Mrs. Pyecraft was sincerely shocked by this daring avowal.

Beechy laughed. "Yes. He tells me he does often enough! Dear old Aurelio, and I love him too," she added, patting the darn she had just finished.

Mrs. Pyecraft gave a little snort. "Well! So you love him, too, do you, miss? 'Enry, do you hear that?"

Mr. Pyecraft, with a sidelong look of warning at Beechy, nodded.

"I do, my dear. She means like a friend, Augusta, don't you, Beechy? There's different ways of loving—lots of 'em."

It is an odd fact that the dried-up old woman was, in spite of their long life together, absolutely untroubled by any other woman, very jealous of her husband.

Beechy looked at them wonderingly. Jealousy as a quality she understood very well, being an Italian. She herself had been jealous of Aurelio Ruffo's friendship for a pretty Scotch girl who kept Leffingwell's books, but that her Uncle 'Enry could awaken the sentiment never failed, when the fact was brought to her notice, to amuse her.

Old Pyecraft, fat, stooping, bald, his respectable and teetotal nose very red, his embroidered braces pulling his trousers well up above his waist—it was to the girl's mind absurd.

The old man, however, moved his gouty feet nervously.

• "Friendship," he murmured, "friendship is very different from what a man feels, *h'm*!—for 'is wife. That's what I meant, my dear."

"That," returned Mrs. Pyecraft moodily, "is what you say. Trouble will come, 'Enry, I suppose, although we are old now. You remember what I says to you the third time you asked me—and I told you about 'Ector Adams——"

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"I know, I know——"

At that moment Annie, the sixth cook-general who had come to No. 57 since Beechy's arrival, appeared in the kitchen window, and asked her mistress if she would mind stepping in for a moment.

Mrs. Pyecraft stepped.

"Uncle 'Enry," said Beechy, "what is it about letter A?"

"'Ush, my dear, 'ush!"

The old man glanced nervously after his wife.

"But—you said you'd tell me."

Ever since her first day at St. Augustine's, Beechy had felt a sinister influence in the atmosphere there. A mysterious something referring to her aunt's fate and to the first letter of the alphabet.

Once or twice she had asked Mrs. Pyecraft, but information had been denied her almost violently, and now the reference to a Mr. Adams had put it into her mind again.

Pyecraft sat down in his wife's chair.

"Well, you see, Beechy, it's just this, only mind you never let 'er guess you know. She was born, your Aunt Augusta, in Acton, in April, 'er father's name was Arthur, and 'er mother's Annie. When she was twenty she went to visit a friend named Ashby, who lived in Alnwick, and there she met a young man named 'Ector Adams. They were engaged."

Beechy had stopped working, and watched him with the deepest interest. She was far too Italian not to be superstitious, and the simple fatefulness of the story impressed her.

"Well, Adams," pursued Uncle Pyecraft, "'e died. She was awful cut up about it. It was very queer, Beechy. The next year she began 'avin' the asthmy, too. Oh, there's lots of things. Asparrowgus, for instance, she can't abide, and I've got the gout, which the real name for it is harthritis. When I married her she didn't much

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care to 'ave me, my name being 'Enry Pyecraft—no 'a's,' you see—but we named the baby 'Arriet—and she died when she was two. She didn't half like this road beginning with a haitch, but I told 'er an haitch is next best to a 'h'a.' And—oh, well, it's very strange, Beechy, ver-ry strange. And then your being an actress—and always a-talking about artists——”

Beechy nodded gravely. “ Yes, it is strange. All good things and all bad things ” (she said “ tings ”) “ begin with a 'h'a.' *Anch' io son superstiziosa.* ” As she avowed her own superstitions she instinctively touched a little bunch of charms she wore on a silver bangle. There was a tiny coral hand with the middle fingers curled in, the index and the little finger almost meeting across them; a tiny gold medal of St. Anthony of Padua; a hog-oak pig that Aurelio had brought to her after a trip to the Irish lakes, and various other trifles. •

“ I left it home last week when I went to my lesson, and could not sing a *little* bit. Very bad, Maestro very cross. But, Uncle 'Enry,” she began in a low voice as Mrs. Pyecraft came towards them, “ the opera is ‘ Aida,’—tell her. Now I'll go and practise, aunt.” •

A few minutes later Mrs. Pyecraft sat with invisible lips as the sounds of the girl's voice, firm and clear in its roulades and sustained notes, came down through her carefully closed window.

“ It's a beautiful voice, Augusta, ain't it now ? ” the old man ventured anxiously.

“ I suppose it is, as you all say so, but it's too loud for my taste. And remember, 'Enry, the minute she is on the stage she leaves my 'ouse.” •

“ Of course, of course, my dear.”

Somehow, as time passed, they had learned to forget that Beechy was Mrs. Pyecraft's niece. It seemed to the old man that she was his, and his attitude towards his wife was one of gratitude for her kindness to an interloper introduced by him.

CHAPTER XXIV

BUCINI

IF the Reverend Mr. Perkins had not appeared just when he did that November afternoon, Beechy would undoubtedly have been sent away. Mrs. Pyecraft had never forgiven her sister several things, not only her becoming a Catholic. Carrie had been pretty and light-hearted, and had been the one pleasant nature in a dull, depressed family, and as such she was unpopular at home.

Then a Mrs. Arbuthnot, who lived near Acton, met the younger sister, took a fancy to her, and used to invite her to her house.

The young girl here met amusing people of a better class than her own family; she learned to curl her hair, to pinch her waist, to look up through her eyelashes, to sing little songs about farewells, and roses, and broken hearts.

All these things Augusta, grim-visaged even then, bitterly resented. The sisters quarrelled, and Mrs. Arbuthnot took Carrie to Torquay.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was a vain, under-educated woman, not at all a good friend for silly little Carrie Smith, but she was kind and cheery, and enjoyed life, so Carrie willingly went abroad with her one February.

In Rome they quarrelled, and poor Carrie was suddenly thrown on her own resources.

Like most English girls of that period, she believed her ignorant, undisciplined self to be perfectly adapted to educate children, and through a series of chances she presently found herself installed as nursery governess to the children of Princess Lilly del Grillo. She was more or

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less the slave of Mademoiselle Grenier, the governess, but the children were charming, she had food enough and a dignified, princely roof over her head, so she was not unhappy.

One day in May, when lilacs and roses filled the garden, she was sitting on the edge of a dilapidated old fountain sketching, with the impertinence of her type, the dome of St. Peter's among the roofs in the plain below, when she heard the children's voices calling "Uncle Giulio, Uncle Giulio !"

The little governess, the sun in her fair hair, looked up, and saw Giulio Cavaleone approaching her ; splendid in the gaudy riding costume of the smart Roman youth of his day and type.

"I—I beg your pardon," he said politely in Italian. "I thought the children were alone."

"They—they *are*," she stammered. "I am only—the under-governess——"

She was twenty, he was twenty-two. They were both good-looking, neither was in love with anyone else, the month was May, in Rome.

The only strange part of it was that he married her. But he did, perhaps trusting that his new position as a married man would cause the old prince, his father's cousin, to relent in his attitude towards certain long-outstanding debts.

This part of the plan failed ; there was a sale, a scandal, and the penniless couple lived for a time in absolute retirement, no one knew, or cared, where.

Cavaleone at last got a very small position as clerk in some big warehouse, and it was then that he brought his little wife to the Via del Violino. At first they lived fairly comfortably, for naturally a Cavaleone had always a small amount of credit, and Carrie had the virtues as well as the faults of her class. She was a tidy little housekeeper.

The old rooms were in themselves beautiful, and she loved the loggia with its twisted pillars.

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Giulio worked, and, for a wonder, his love lasted.

At the end of two years a baby was born, and he gave her the beautiful historical name of her family—Beatrice.

Then, Carrie began to die. It took her two years to die, but she was happy to the end, and he always thanked the saints, in whom his belief was as undoubting as a child's, that his accident did not happen while she was there to be hurt by it.

Beechy was two when they brought her father home limp and white after a misstep in the darkness of the warehouse and a little fall of not more than two feet.

He never walked again, and the Commendatore, the only one of his former friends who still came to see him, went, as has been told, to the old prince, and persuaded him that as Principe Cavaleone he could not allow his second cousin to die of starvation.

So this is how it all happened.

Whatever there is in the theory of heredity, it must at least be admitted that it does not fall to many to come of a princely Roman stock on one side, and of small dissenting Cockney shopkeepers on the other.

In after life Beechy often wondered what had induced her to stay on with the Pyecrafts.

She had come, she by that time realised, out of curiosity, and the absolute need of change that had seized her. But she was most unwelcome to her aunt, even after she had disclosed her possession of fifty pounds a year.

The mental atmosphere of St. Augustine's was certainly not congenial to the artist in her, the food was too horrible for words (all her life fried fat or butter sickened her), chapel was a nightmare, her aunt snapped and snarled at her like some ill-conditioned dog, from morning till night, and made her wear awful frocks much too large for her, so that she might have room to grow in them.

The climate was a thing unspeakably horrible, the sun a mere pallid imitation of a real sun, and the only music she heard was the frightful growling at chapel.

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"Why, then," she once asked a group of admiring listeners, as she monologued about herself in the innocently egotistic way so characteristic of her, "did I not leave?"

• And answering, as usual, her own question, she declared, with a funny amused twist of her eyebrows and the drolly stuck-out lower lip, that women were then imitating, and that Sargent deliciously suggested in his great portrait of her, "Why did I not leave? Because the Cockney 'alf of me liked it!"

There was also, probably, her natural love of teasing, for it greatly amused her to watch her aunt's dislike of her wax and wane; there was also her real affection for Mr. Pyecraft, and there was the great fact of her education.

For Aurelio had on his very first visit been told that she wished to learn.

"What do you wish to learn? Everything?"

To the youth's surprise, however, she shook her head.

"No. I will learn English and French and history."

"History?"

"Of course," she flashed, impatient, as she always was, of slowness of comprehension.

"How can I be an actress if I know no history?"

So after two months' hard application to the mysteries of the English language, under the ecstatic guidance of young Ruffo, she learned to read with an old Italian who had lived in London for thirty years, and whose English was fairly good.

Learning to read English, she always declared, was the most difficult task of her life, but at the end of four months she was sufficiently master of printed words to go to the Polytechnic for history.

This place was proposed by Mr. Perkins, who in his rather unctuous way was extremely kind to her.

It advanced slowly, the learning, for she had an inherent distaste for books, but it advanced.

It was entirely her own idea not to find a singing-teacher for the first year.

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"I am young," she told Aurelio, "but I am growing, and this English is very tiring. And I must walk a lot."

Regarding her art, Cavaleone was always distinguished by a most unusual good sense.

At the end of the first year, she wrote to Camillo Subiaco, and he advised her to study with a friend of his, one Antonio Bucini.

After violent opposition from Mrs. Pyecraft, during which Becchy went out and looked for lodgings, Aurelio discovered a means by which to smooth things out.

His word-picture of Bucini was masterly in detail, considering that it was drawn instantaneously and entirely from his imagination.

"But, Signora," he cried, opening his fine eyes very widely in affected amazement, "what *can* you object to in that excellent old gentleman? If you could but see him!"

"Old gentleman?" snapped Aunt Augusta suspiciously.

"But yes! He is over sixty, with much white hair. And he and his wife are so religious and good. Your Queen invites him to Windsor, but he says No—very politely he says No. For why? He never leaves his dear old wife——"

Whether it was the dear old wife or the Queen's invitation that convinced Mrs. Pyecraft of his suitability as a teacher of the wicked art of song to Becchy, one can but guess, but the old woman silently, ungraciously withdrew her opposition, and Becchy went three days later for her first lesson.

Aurelio had said nothing to her about his fabrications, so the girl was very much surprised, when she was shown into the master's inner room, to find herself facing a man of forty-two or three dressed in a most lady-killing way, and surrounded by photographs of ladies, all lovely, or at least doing their best to be lovely.

Bucini had many very bad qualities.

He was extremely immoral, he was a liar of the first

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water, he believed no good of any living woman (his own mother being, of course, dead).

But his two good qualities stood out white and clear among all the baseness.

The man was fanatically sincere about his art, and he was one of the then best singing-teachers in the world.

The others were a man in Paris and a little old woman in Milan.

Beechy, in her ill-cut frock and cotton gloves, did not please the master as he looked at her.

"H'm, yes; Subiaco wrote to me about you—how old are you?" he asked her in Italian.

"Eighteen."

"You have studied?"

"Yes."

"And you wish to sing for opera?"

"Yes."

"H'm. Well, take off your jacket. I will try your voice—but I am very busy just now——"

His hair, Beechy noticed, smelt of lilac, and his black moustache was waxed to infinitesimal points. He wore a grey velvet coat and a silk shirt with a silk collar. In his cuffs she observed baroc pearls.

On his delicate watch-chain hung a small gold locket with a fern-leaf clover in emeralds on one side, and a complicated monogram in diamonds on the other.

He made her sing a scale, some octaves, and some sustained notes.

Then he said, "Can you sing me some song or an aria?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Anything from 'Aida,' or 'Rigoletto,' or 'Traviata,' or 'Faust,' or 'Romeo,' or——"

He turned, laughing up at her.

"The devil you can! Well, let's have Giulietta's waltz."

"*Ebbene!* I have not sung it for a year, but I will try."

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He used to tell the story later.

"There she stood, dressed in brown sacking, with red hands clasped in front of her. She was frightened, though she says she wasn't, for she was pale.

"And—she sang the thing without hesitating once. Her voice was cold and undeveloped, *si capisce*, and she had not sung for a year, but—there she was, a born singer, with that marvellous flexibility of voice, and the self-possession of a Melba! I knew, of course, that I had found a treasure."

What he said to Beechy, however, was rather different.

"Yes, you have a voice, Signorina, and your teaching hasn't been bad, as far as it goes—but you have much to learn."

"That," she answered, quite simply, yet with fine ironical effect, "is why I have come to you."

"Signorina Bellini?" he called.

And Signorina Bellini (who for the past ten years had been in the eyes of God and of the law Signora Bucini) came in, and arranged with Beechy when she was to come again.

"How much do you charge a lesson?" the girl asked.

"H'm. That—is according——" he stammered a little. "What can you afford? There is no good in your taking lessons, if paying for them is going to starve you," he added kindly.

Beechy reflected. "I have twelve hundred and fifty francs a year," she said, "and I live with an uncle and aunt. I have been giving them six hundred and twenty-five a year—will the rest be enough for you?"

He was startled.

"But——"

"That will be all right," she declared. "Quite right."

CHAPTER XXV

"AIDA" AND AN EVENING FROCK

MRS. PYECRAFT always remembered that the night of "Aida" was in April, and that Beechy went with Aurelio. It also had not failed to strike her that Bucini's Christian name was Alessandro. It was one of the evenings destined to stand out clear in the memory of each member of the little group.

Beechy dressed with the lightest of hearts.

She was now nineteen, and it may be well to describe her. She stood exactly five foot nine in her stockings, and her figure was fully developed, though less beautiful than it became later, because she wore bad, cheap stays and ill-cut clothes.

Her hair she wore piled high on her head. It was very thick, and had on either temple one big smooth wave.

The Sargent portrait, whatever one may think of other portraits of the master, flatters her. He has made her nose more delicate than it ever was, and he has shortened her lips. The eyes are marvellously like, and the poise of her head.

Her complexion, very ruddy when she was a child, had changed at this time to the soft peachiness about which we all used to talk. (It is, however, not true that she never made up for the stage; she always made up.)

But the great charm of her was her wonderful mobility of expression. She laughed and smiled quietly, not thereby greatly disturbing the muscles of her mouth, but her smile seemed to affect in a curious way even her

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brow. Some child once called her "the lady with the smily face."

On the other hand, even in private life, sorrow and anger were quite as keenly shown in her expression. The darkness of her eyes seemed as limitless as the darkness of a starless night. Her hands were strong, not very small, and had very turned-back finger-tips, and beautifully shaped nails—the Cavaleone hand, in short.

And she walked as she had learned to walk in her rough-shod Roman days, using the muscles of her feet as few people have ever done.

The night of "Aida" she dressed carefully, put on a long grey ulster, tied a crimson scarf round her head, and went downstairs.

Aurelio was already there, wearing in honour of the occasion a red carnation in his coat.

A handsome young man, Aurelio Ruffo, with large, golden-brown eyes, and brown satin hair, and white teeth.

"You have the tickets?" she asked, as she came in, adding casually, "Good evening."

Mrs. Pyecraft, who was reading, looked up over her spectacles. "What dress 'ave you on?" she asked.

"Come on, Aurelio, hurry, or we shall miss the 'bus," cried Beechy. "Good-bye, Aunt Augusta, good-bye, Uncle 'Enry. Oh—blue, aunt."

She rushed Aurelio out of the house, and when the door closed laughed in her throat, a kind of childlike chuckle.

"It is blue," she said in Italian.

"What is blue?—the sky?"

"My dress—whatever you like. Oh, Aurelio, to think of it! To hear Subiaco as Radamès—'Celeste Aida,'" she hummed as they started briskly towards Dawes Road.

"It is fine music," agreed the young goldsmith gravely. "And I shouldn't think he could sing it; it is high. His voice is more lyrical."

Beechy laughed scornfully.

"Subiaco—not even in a dream is it lyrical! You

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have heard him only in 'Faust,' which doesn't suit him at all. And to think that—let me see—four years ago he was living at the 'Two Queens,' and singing for a thousand francs a night. Ah, there's the 'bus——"

A 'bus, at night, is by no means an unromantic vehicle. There is a 'bus-poetry just as there is a poetry of chimney-pots. It is fine to sit on high and look down at the hurrying world, the lights come more into one's range of vision from 'bus-height than they do from carriage-height. The houses, the buildings are entities, not lower stories, the mystery of traffic comes home to one a thousand times more clearly as one looks down at the apparently inextricable tangle of houses and vehicles that unravels so smoothly as it works its way onward.

Beechy sat next an old woman very much like Mrs. Gamp in appearance—a waste, since Beechy had never heard of the immortal Sairey. In front of her, next a youth in a red tie, sat Aurelio, leaning back to look at Beechy.

He was possessed of all the sympathetic tact of his country, and knew that the girl did not wish to talk. Moreover, experience had taught him that when Beechy had a silent fit, either from intense delight of appreciation, like this present one, or one of depression, an inopportune word was likely to call forth from her a sharp rebuke. So they were both silent while the 'bus went up King's Road towards Sloane Square.

While they waited for the other 'bus, Aurelio shyly produced from his pocket a small package.

"Bice, dear," he said in Italian, "I did not forget your birthday—but—it has only just come——"

Beechy started. "Oh, *Grazie*—thank you so much," she answered.

The little package contained a small book bound in vellum, and tied with narrow thongs of kid.

"It is Dante's 'Vita Nuova,'" the young man explained, rather shyly. "I—I thought you might like it——"

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Beechy smiled at him. "I *do* like it, Aurelio. It was so kind of you—and it came from the blessed country!" (They had long since agreed to speak of Italy always as the *paese beato*.)

She stood holding the book in her hand, looking at it rather absently. He knew that she did not see it, that she was thinking of Rome, and for a moment he said nothing.

Then he took it from her.

"Open it—anywhere, by chance, Bice, and see what you come to—as a kind of oracle——"

"No, no, I don't wish to——"

"But, *please*, I beg you to."

The 'bus was coming. Hastily she opened the book and put her fingers on some lines. They were those which Dante Rossetti has so well translated:

"Certainly the Lordship of Love is evil;
Seeing that the more homage his servants pay to him
The more grievous and painful are the torments
Wherewith he torments them."

Beechy laughed carelessly. She was superstitious, but she was so young, at least mentally, that she made no personal application of the words. But Aurelio was not too young.

He changed colour, and his hand flew to his watch-chain, where hung a scrap of coral.

They climbed up on the 'bus and sat down together. He was very much in love, but he never dreamed, even in those days of her obscurity, that Beechy would marry him. Indeed he never asked her to do so, either then or later. His was one of the faithful, undramatic loves that come to most attractive women at some time of their lives; loves that in their unselfish devotion do more than their recipients ever dream of towards making their lives pleasant and easy.

To Beechy, Aurelio was as necessary now as he had been

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in the days when he was her only means of communication with the little world in which she found herself.

He took her to concerts, fetched her, when he could do so, from her singing-lessons, bought books for her at prices which an older woman would have suspected. He gave her flowers, walked with her, showed to her the great pictures that are part of England's treasure. He once even bought her some stockings when she was too busy with Charles XI to go shopping herself—but that was long ago.

He was not unhappy, the good Ruffo. His love was too true and too unselfish for him not to derive from it much joy. But it was changing his nature, and he was even now quieter, less merry than formerly.

He lived alone, this *cavaliere servente*, in a room in his employer's house, and he worked hard at his delicate trade that is an art. He neglected nothing, scamped nothing, but more and more Beechy grew to be a sort of monomania with him.

He thought of her the first thing in the morning, the last thing at night.

And all these things Beechy knew in a way; if you had asked her about them she could have, and would have, told them to you without hesitation, but she did not, nevertheless, realise in the least what it meant.

He had given her his life, and she took it with pleased, careless fingers, as a child would take a priceless jewel.

As the 'bus made its way down Piccadilly, the young man pondered all these things for the thousandth time.

"She likes me as yet better than any other man," he thought; "but when she loves some man she will forget me. Shall I be able to bear it?"

And this was all his rebellion. There are some few such men, but not many. Perhaps in the old days there were more; these are individualist days, when selfishness has been furbished up into something like a virtue.

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" 'Certainly the Lordship of Love is evil,' " he quoted to himself. " Does that mean it will be evil to her ? "

Again he touched his bit of coral.

Beechy meantime was blissfully happy. Before her lay the joy of hearing Subiaco sing the best of Verdi's operas ; and in the mere present she sat cool and comfortable on a 'bus, watching London.

People who sit and wait for great moments, miss many wonderful small moments, and they are to be pitied.

A barrow of oranges half unrolled from twisted purple papers caught Beechy's eye.

" Look, Aurelio, what a lovely colour effect ! " she cried.

As " Tosca," her cloak was of orange velvet, lined with violet, and she told Aurelio that the idea had come to her that night in the 'bus.

Proudly Aurelio conducted her towards the stalls, and as she took off her ugly ulster he gasped.

Beechy was in evening dress !

It was a dark blue gauzy stuff, almost sapphire in shade, and it was made without ornament, in swathing folds.

" *Dio Santo*, Bice, you are magnificent ! " the young fellow said.

She smiled. " Yes, am I not ? When the master gave me the tickets I made up my mind to have a decent frock. And dark blue wears well," she added carelessly. " It was a pleasant surprise to find I had good shoulders."

Her throat was even then very classic in its white strength.

Aurelio looked at her shyly.

It hardly seemed possible to him that this was really Beechy.

They took their places and looked round.

It was her first glimpse of the luxurious side of opera-going.

Strange to sit in front of and behind jewelled ladies and beautifully dressed men ; strange to see, as she

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glanced round, the hair on the brows of the men ; there seemed much more hair in London than she, judging from the gallery view of the stalls, had suspected.

A girl near by wore a string of beautiful pearls, and next her an old woman wore diamonds.

"Which do you like best ?" asked Aurelio, following her eyes.

"Diamonds. Pearls are dead, like drawn teeth, but diamonds are alive and burn."

She never wore a pearl, for this fancy's sake.

At last the tuning-up began, and her eyes stopped roaming.

Surely Verdi was of the very greatest. A comparative study of his operas seems to me to reveal an almost unparalleled scale of improvement.

Compare "La Traviata" with "Aida"! Or the "Ballo in Maschera" with "Otello." A beautiful, busy life, crowned when he was a very old man by the modern, masterly "Falstaff." But "Aida" is the best of all, to me, and to Beechy.

Beechy knew "Aida" well. One of Bucini's admirable theories was that an artist singing a rôle in an opera needed a thorough comprehension, not only of his or her rôle, but of the whole opera.

And his accompanist was a great pianist *manqué*; a man who but for his weakness for vodka might have been a worthy rival of the best. So the lessons were not only lessons in singing, but in music, and thus Beechy knew much of the best operatic music in the world, and operatic music was the only kind that ever appealed to her. An orchestra without the accompaniments of voice and action left her perfectly cold always.

So she was well prepared that evening for the feast of sound offered to her.

The Aida was good, but not wonderful ; and disregarding the perfection of Subiaco, the best Radamès there has ever been, Beechy sat there watching the *prima*

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donna. all her old critical faculty burning like a fire within her.

"Splendid, isn't she?" whispered Aurelio, and Beechy answered, her eyes fixed on the stage, "No. You wait till I sing it!"

After the first act, while the house still echoed with the wild applause in which the British public, once well stirred, is second to none, a good-looking man with a daffodil in his coat came and spoke to Beechy.

"Will you come with me, Signorina?" he said courteously. "Subiaco wishes to see you."

"Subiaco!" Her voice expressed great joy, but no surprise. "Of course I will come, *maestro*. May Signor Ruffo come too?"

Bucini nodded carelessly. "That understands itself——"

They found the tenor lying on a sofa in his dressing-room, drinking black coffee, in which were beaten up the yolks of two raw eggs.

He looked strange and very ugly in his make-up, but his manner was as natural as that of a child.

"*Eccola!*" he cried in a whisper, jumping up and shaking Beechy by the hand, "here she is, the little Roman—but a big Roman now. How do you like it?"

"Like——"

"But the performance! Did I sing well? Do I look well? Do you like my costume?"

He watched her as anxiously as if his whole career depended on her answer.

"Splendid! Glorious!"

"Good! And you liked my gestures? I am dignified, ah? Not too Italian—sufficiently Egyptian?"

Aurelio listened with a flicker of amusement under his young moustache; but Aurelio was not an opera-singer.

They talked for five minutes, entirely about Subiaco himself, and then he sent them away. "I must rest—

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the duet in the next act is horrible, it breaks my heart——"

Still under his breath he produced a number of sharp nasal tones between a snarl and a bark.

"Ah, yes, my voice is high to-night—the *timbre* is good. Good-bye now. Come to see me to-morrow at the 'Savoy' at eleven. I wish to hear you sing. You bring her, Bucini—good-bye—good-bye——"

He waved them out, and as the door closed they heard once more his queer little nasal bark as he tried his voice.

CHAPTER XXVI
A YEAR LATER

"May 11th.

"DEAREST SIGNORA SCARPIA,—I have delayed writing to you because I knew the papers I sent you could tell you the news better than I. It is all true, and I, your little Bice, am now the Cavaleone! It is raining to-day, and I am lying down in my *Salotto*, and Aurelio Ruffo, of whom I have written to you, is writing to you for me. You know how horribly I write, and how I loathe it. Well, Aurelio writes all my letters now, and corrects them when I make mistakes!

"You want to hear it all from the beginning. Please read it to dear Father Antonio, will you? And give him my love, and ask him from me if he would mind telling them in the *Via del Violino*? They will all be glad, dear Signora Marianna, and old Agnese, and the rest.

"Well—if you could see the room I write you from!

"The woodwork is all white, shiny, and carved with wreaths of flowers, there is yellow silk on the walls, and there is a golden clock on the chimney-piece.

"The chairs are yellow and gold and white. There is an open fire—a big one, sticks, but no pine-cones. Aurelio is going to get me some.

"Then I have a bedroom, and a bathroom made of white tiles. I take a bath every day.

"My bedroom is beautiful, white and pink, and my maid is opposite me. Yes, *la mia cameriera*, isn't it a joke?

"Well, four weeks ago I 'got my chance,' as you wrote me I should, and sang *Giulietta*. It was pretty bad,

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my voice wasn't clear, and I was so frightened I kept forgetting the words. Subiaco prompted me a dozen times. It was so bad, I thought they'd hiss, but they didn't. They are not very particular, the English, and I looked pretty, whereas the last Juliet, Madame Delavigne, is as broad as she is long, and old.

"It is a wonderful rôle, Giulietta.

"Wasn't it strange that I was so frightened, after singing all this year in the provinces ?

"When the *maestro* got the provincial engagement for me he did it so I should get over being nervous, but, God in Heaven, it did not help at all.

"To sing in Manchester or any other provincial town, is less trying than to sing in any Italian village, the people are so inartistic.

"But London—what they don't understand they pretend that they do, and they fool each other and sometimes themselves !

"Well, then I cried after the first act, and dear Subiaco gave me some coffee, and I felt better. The second act wasn't much better as to voice, but I found I could *act*. There are very few singers who can act.

"S. was an angel to me, and I enjoyed it, although I had no *mezza voce* at all.

"When it was all over these dear geese called and called for me, by *name*, if you please, and I had two baskets of flowers, one from dear Aurelio and the other from Bucini.

"You will understand that I sang Giulietta only because the *prima donna* was ill.

"Luckily she got worse, so the next week I sang Margherita. And, oh, *Signora mia cara*, I sang well. Aubépine, the French tenor, was Faust, and sang in French, while I, of course, sang in Italian. I was frightened at first, but got over it, and my voice was very good.

"Of course there is nothing like practice, and some day I am going to be the very best Margherita, but—well, you saw the papers.

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"Aubépine was much pleased. He said I made him feel such a beast, and I don't wonder. *What* a part Faust's is, what a miserable little man he was !

"Well, the next day I was sent for to see Mr. Harrison, the one who engages the singers at the opera, and he engaged me for the rest of the season. They are so rich, so rich, these English !

"I have so much money that I don't know what to do, and Bucini has made me come to this grand hotel to live, and have a maid, and they took me to a shop called Gié's (that is the way it is pronounced), and Bucini's secretary, Signorina Bellini, chose clothes for me.

"You would like them, only they are of dull colours ; me, I prefer frank, bright colours, but it doesn't much matter.

"Aurelio is tired, so I must stop. I have sung five times, and to-morrow am to sing Gilda.

"People send me flowers and letters, which Aurelio reads. I have had my photograph taken twice, and enclose one of me as Margherita. The dress is grey, and I wear my hair plaited.

"My love to you. Write soon to your BICE."

This letter more or less explains itself, and the interval between the evening of "Aida," an interval of just a year, can be described in a few words.

Subiaco, delighted with her voice, and after some consultation with Bucini, had got her an engagement in a very good touring company, in which hard school she learned the thousand small technicalities the lack of which damns so many gifted amateurs.

It was no easy life, for she sang nearly every night, in second-rate, uncomfortable theatres, and her lodgings were cheap and her food bad.

But these things did not either frighten or harm her, and when her chance came she was readier to take it than her letter implies.

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From the first the public, about whom she was so impolite, was charmed with her, and that goes a very long way towards being half the battle anywhere.

Her fright lent her only a certain *gauche*, grace better fitted to the young Juliet than the maturer fascinations of Madame Delavigne, and her lovely true voice was too well placed to be unbeautiful, even when she was frightened.

And this brings us to a period when a short résumé must be given of her different admirers.

They were many, but they were of very little importance to her, so they may be hastily classified.

I. Aurelio Ruffo. Unaspiring slave and faithful friend.

II. Bucini, her teacher. Tentative, quickly convinced of the uselessness of his attempts, hence, almost immediately, and quite unsuspected, retiring from the field.

III. Harold Purefoy, Esq., of Barfield, in the county of York. Intentions undecided, more a gentlemanly rustic's reaching out for adventures than anything else. Snubbed into immediate submission, and married three months later to a red-headed cousin.

IV. Sir Oliver Cheshunt. Intentions strictly dishonourable. Disposed of one autumn evening by a severe box on the ear, and the displeasing realisation that she was three inches taller, and two inches broader across the shoulders than he.

V. Reverend Peter Creesdale, a curate who should have been nearly anything else, whom she refused very kindly, and to whom she gave a lock of her hair.

VI. (And up to the period of her letter to the Scarpia, last) Cricket Londale, stroke of last year's Oxford crew, and one of the finest youths who ever lived. No intentions whatever, nothing but an aching, maddening love, to which she lent a patient, though bored ear, and whom she mimicked for Aurelio's benefit.

She was of the kind of woman with whom men do fall in love.

Roughly speaking women may be divided into two

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classes, the kind men do, and the kind men don't, fall in love with ; and Beechy was indisputably of the former class.

But she was not a flirt, and she was very busy indeed, so that the above classification by no means fails to express her attitude towards her victims.

The next person to be noted is Lady Cossie Bleck.

How Lady Cossie (Cassandra) got hold of the new soprano people often wondered, and many of the most romantic suppositions were made about the matter.

The truth, which never occurred to anybody, was simply this.

Lady Cossie wrote to Beechy, and telling her how much she liked her singing (oh, horrible limitations of the English language !), asked her to lunch with her.

And Beechy went.

Aurelio advised her to do so, because Lady Cossie was a lady and not a plain Mrs. Also because she lived in Upper Grosvenor Street.

Lady Cossie was a little old woman, unmarried, who was said to have been very much in love with the present King, though she had never spoken to him. She had a very ugly house full of mirrors and dark plush, and she wore the old clothes of a gay young cousin, which gave her a rather ridiculous air of false youth.

She was poor, but she would not let her town house, and she was supposed to be translating into English one of M. Beyle's peerless romances.

"I like your singing *very* much," Lady Cossie said, as she gave poor hungry Beechy one of the two attenuated chops on the silver platter before her.

"Thank you," Beechy answered politely.

"And I thought you looked nice, so I wanted to meet you."

"Thank you."

Lady Cossie wore a pale green frock embroidered in silver, a Grand Prix frock of last year. Mrs. Gerry Bonnard, her cousin, had been a dream in it, and when she

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told Lady Cossie this interesting fact, the courageous old girl retorted like a shot, "And I shall be a nightmare," which she was.

Behind her hung a sketch of Angelica Kauffmann, supposed to have been drawn by Sir Joshua, and on the opposite wall hung an excellent Hoppner.

But there was thin *bouillon*, a chop apiece, and a thimbleful of peas, a tiny sweet omelette, and a peach apiece, for luncheon.

Beechy, hungry singer, longed for food, but her little hostess seemed well pleased.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-one."

"You look older."

"Yes, I am so strong. I used——"

"What did you use to do? Tell me."

"Aurelio—a friend of mine—said I mass not tell too much—many things!" returned the girl simply.

"Ah, but to me!"

"Well, I used to work very hard, sweeping and gardening."

"But where——"

For a moment Beechy weighed in her mind the rival advisabilities of the "Two Queens" and the convent as an answer. Then with some shrewdness she said, "In a convent in Rome."

"Ah! So you were educated in Rome?"

"I wasn't h'educated anywhere, but I lived in the convent for long time."

Lady Cossie, in pursuit of information, was indefatigable.

"And is Cavaleone your real name, my dear? When I was in Rome years ago—my brother was Minister—I knew a *Prince* Cavaleone——"

She hesitated.

Beechy, looking up from the chop bone she was scraping with more enthusiasm than is usual in society, nodded shortly, "My father's cousin; he's *dead*."

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This simple statement, passing through the filter of Lady Cossie's imagination, did for Beechy far more than she ever imagined.

"You remember old Prince Cavaleone in Rome? To whose *palazzo* we went to see the Carnival Procession, Charles dear? He's her cousin."

The next person received the impression that the old man was her uncle, and so on it went.

"Dearest Signora," she burst out in one of the letters dictated to the good Aurelio, "last night I dined at the house of Lord X——. Such a beautiful staircase there is, and such beautiful gold dishes. And the food! Never have I eaten so well, or so much. It is wonderful, the way they live, these English! I sang after dinner, but I had eaten too much, and my voice was not good, but they did not know. . . . To-morrow I am going to the house of a Duchess to lunch. I met her yesterday, and she is very nice, but made up as for the theatre, which does not look well in the sunlight. . . .

"English girls are wonderful, so beautiful, so sweet, and such delicious voices when they speak. When they sing, behold it is *polenta* in the throat. Very dreadful. . . . The Signori are very fine, with beautiful shining nails. Their teeth are not so good as Italians'. They wear sweet-smelling stuff on their hair, which is quite flat and shining like satin. They tell me I am beautiful, and they stare at me, but I like it . . ." etc., etc

CHAPTER XXVII

BEECHY MEETS LORD CHARLES CRESSAGE

THE critics at this time had much to say about Cavalcione, and the greater part of it seems to have been true. They agreed that she was the most delightful creature on the operatic stage, that her voice was well placed, true, and spontaneous.

No one denied that she had her many rôles at her fingers'—or tongue's—end. And her acting, by itself, was wonderful.

To see her one night as Marguerite and the next as Carmen was amazing, for the one looked not a bit like the other, and the very quality of her voice seemed to change with the opera, the voice of poor Marguerite being limpid, tender, and pathetic, while that of Carmen seemed heavier, warmer, more passionate.

The fact that she could at the age of twenty-one sing the rôle of the abandoned little cigarette-maker as she did proved not only that she was a great singer, but that she was an incomparable mimic. She had seen Calvé. She had seen Ridolfi in the rôle, and from her keen observation of them she had, so to say, compiled her own edition of the character.

And she was singing Carmen when she met Charles Cressage.

It was a gala night, and the house was ablaze with jewels.

In the Royal box sat the Prince and Princess of Wales, and nearly every grand-tier box had its diamond fender, for a big ball was on that evening.

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Beechy sat in her dressing-room making up.

It was warm, and she mopped impatiently at her forehead, as beads of perspiration gathered there to the detriment of her work.

Her hair, which she wore in two long plaits, was tied with scraps of red ribbon, and she wore a costume of her own invention, a short red skirt, and a white blouse, over which was crossed a little green silk shawl. A workgirl's dress it was, but effective in colour and very becoming to her.

"Curses on this heat," she growled in Italian. "Give me a cup of coffee, please, Signora. *Oh*, I am so nervous!"

The Signora—for it was an old acquaintance, brought over by the exigencies of Beechy's new position—poured out the coffee.

She was resplendent, in her peculiar way, for Beechy loved to give, but she wore no stays, and not even the opulent richness of the folds of ruby-coloured silk could conceal the superabundance of her bosom.

At her throat, fastened in a bit of spangled lace, was a brooch of small diamonds, also a present from Beechy.

And her still abundant and black hair was combed into a mountain of oily waves, and caught with a jewelled comb.

"Why should you be nervous?" she asked reproachfully. "You have sung it a dozen times."

Beechy turned to her an exasperated face roughly smeared with grease paints.

"Just try singing in public yourself," she cried.

"Nervous! Go and see Subiaco. *He'll throw* things at you."

The Signora rocked comfortably to and fro in her chair. "*Va bene, va bene, cara*; be as nervous as you like. And have some more coffee. It is *poison* for the nerves!"

Beechy burst out laughing. "Give me that box, please. You are right, I am absurd. But—oh, the horror of the first glance at all these people; every single one of them seems an executioner. There, is that all right?"

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As she spoke, Subiaco came into the room dressed in his uniform. He was made up, but looked agitated.

"What shall I do?" he began. "The Prince and Princess are here, and I am so hoarse I can't speak!"

Beechy looked at him.

"*Macchè!* Nonsense, Subiachino *mio*. Your voice is all right. Try the pitch."

He shook his head piteously. "I—I am hoarse, I tell you."

Bice rummaged among the things on her untidy dressing-table, and found a tuning-pipe, which she blew. "*There!*"

Obediently the great artist sang the note, and after a moment or two another and another.

He was not in the least hoarse.

The Signora laughed, but with a little fierce gesture Beechy silenced her. To her Subiaco's state of nerves was a serious matter, a kind of instantaneous tragedy.

He sat down by her and took hold of her long plaits.

"You console me, bring me luck," he said quietly.

"You bring *me* luck," she retorted with one of her very few flare-ups of gratitude. "You have brought me—all I have."

At that moment the orchestra struck up, and Subiaco left the room.

"He is very superstitious," commented the Signora, to whom, as to most people, familiarity had brought, not contempt, but a friendly lack of reverence.

"Yes," answered Beechy thoughtfully.

Her first fright over, her voice came in great volume and beauty, and sure of every note of her rôle, she could give herself up to the joy of *being* Carmen.

"It sings itself," she whispered to someone.

And as she coquetted about the stage, trying to attract José's attention, she looked up to a lower-tier box on the right, and saw Charles Cressage's eyes fixed on her.

His face as she looked at it seemed a very strange and contradictory one. And because she subconsciously for-

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mulated everything she rapidly drew a little mental description of him.

It was, she thought, a classic face full of modern expression ; it had a look of great innocence, the result of being very experienced ; it was the face of a man very young for his years, and, for these same years, very old.

Again and again her eyes met his. And as she sat in the chair mocking José, Cressage took a card from his pocket, and scribbling something on it, retired from sight.

The card was on her table, as she knew it would be, when she entered a few minutes later.

" Lord Charles Cressage." And following the engraved words he had written : " begs Signora Cavaleone to do him the great honour of permitting him to have a moment's conversation with her after the opera."

She was glad, and saw no reason for pretending to be annoyed. The man interested her, and she would be glad to see him.

Not so the Signora, a model of all the proprieties.

" Very impertinent, my dear, and you living in a grand hotel, like a lady ! " the good woman expostulated.

" He is handsome, Signora *mia cara*, and—he is to be shown in here. Understand ? "

When the last thunder of applause had echoed away into silence over poor little Carmen, Cressage appeared at the stage-door, and was conducted at once to Cavaleone's dressing-room.

He found her sitting in a low chair, wrapped in a shabby old red cloak, drinking Chianti and eating a piece of rough grey Italian bread that the useful Scarpia provided her with.

She had not expected him so soon.

Without moving she looked up, and he never forgot the picture. The red cloak, her high-piled hair with its great carved comb, her beautiful forearm in the strong light, the ruby wine.

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"Lord Charles Cressage—eh?" she said gravely.

She never learned to pronounce the name.

"Yes. You are very kind to see me——"

• He was never eloquent, and his wit, such as it was, was spasmodic.

"It is very kind of you to see me," he repeated.

Beechy smiled.

"You liked it?" she asked. "The singing? And the acting? I was good? Ver' good?"

Her anxiety to have his opinion flattered him, which it need not have done. Just then he was to her not an individual at all; he was merely the mouthpiece of her late audience.

But he could not answer. Something in her affected him strangely, making him inarticulate and awkward behind his smooth handsome mask.

"If—you heard us applaud. And look—I have split my glove."

He held up his hand.

Beechy nodded, very much pleased. •

• "Ah, bravo! Yes, it was good. Subiaco was wonderful. Oh, that *romanza* with its *b flat*!"

He nodded.

"Bother Subiaco!" he exclaimed impatiently. "It's you I care about. Your voice. You—you——" He stammered, staring at her.

Beechy burst into delighted laughter.

"I! Me! Oh, I am *ver*' please! Delighted! But you flatter me."

She was very beautiful as she stood there, and more, to him, than beautiful. Most men know what it means, the abrupt, almost appalling coming of the one woman.

Cressage, who at that very moment was engaged in three different love affairs, knew that something had happened to him, and, vaguely, he realised what it was, but he did not put a name to it, even to himself.

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"Are you doing anything now?" he asked. "I mean, if you are not, perhaps you will come to supper with me?"

Beechy nodded. "Yes, I will. I am *very* hungry. I want eggs—a great many eggs——"

Going to the door she called in the banished Signora, and explained to her what was going to happen.

Then she asked Cressage to wait for her at the stage-door in half an hour.

And, having called his motor, he paced up and down by it until the two women appeared.

Beechy wished to go to the "Savoy," which she loved, but, moved by some sub-conscious jealousy, he took them instead to a small French restaurant in Duke Street, where they were almost alone.

Beechy wore, he always remembered, a dark green coat and skirt, a loose white silk shirt, and a black beaver hat with a long plume in it.

He also never forgot how hungry she was, and how much she ate. •

The Signora, portentously stately, feasted daintily, but the singer was ravenous and ate rapidly, with deep draughts of red wine and water.

At first he plied her with questions.

Yes, she was a Roman; yes, Prince Cavaleone was a distant relation; yes (with mischief), her mother was h'English. Her mother's sister had married a dissenting draper in Fulham. No, she was not married. She was twenty-one. She liked London. She was going to Italy for the summer. Yes, with Signora Scarpia.

Yes, she knew Lady Cossie very well. Yes, she was going to Wychley before she went to Italy.

And so on.

She answered all his questions, but she was obviously so *very* much more interested in her buttered eggs!

And the Signora's eye was sinister.

When they got out of his motor at the hotel, Beechy,

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to whom time never meant anything, politely invited him to come up to her sitting-room.

Arrived in that ornate bower, of which she was plainly proud, she dismissed the Signora, and sat down.

"I am sleepy," she said, yawning as a dog yawns, all her teeth showing.

"I—will go," he retorted stiffly, and she sprang up in protestation.

"No, no, I *didn't* mean that!"

He was a very handsome man, a trifle too handsome, many people thought, for his nose was as beautiful as the nose of Napoleon, and his deep-set blue eyes marvels of compelling tenderness. He was forty years old, and what he did not know of the gentle art of lady-killing was not worth knowing.

Yet now, for once, he was at fault, and sat quite mute while her dark eyes frankly and kindly studied him.

"What a pity you don't sing!" she said at last in a thoughtful voice.

"Why?"

"Because you make—a—a so beautiful Romeo," which name she pronounced correctly in the accent on the second syllable.

"I! at my age." His laugh was a little bitter and passionately regretful. "Would you sing Juliet with me?"

She looked at him curiously. "Of course—with joy—if you had a voice."

He rose and took her hand.

"Some day," he said, clearing his throat, "you will meet a man to whose Romeo you will sing Juliet—even if he *has* no voice."

"Shall I?"

"Yes. I mean——"

She burst out into a peal of perfectly unaffected, amused laughter.

"You mean, I know, *l'amore. Chi lo sa?* Who can tell?"

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Cressage changed colour.

"I—can tell. There is—no one—yet?"

He knew that he was making an ass of himself, but he could not help it.

At his age, after all his adventures, he had, he realised, as he waited for her answer, fallen in love—in love, not into one of that much-miscalled passion's many substitutes.

"No one—yet?"

Beechy shrank back from him. His feeling was too intense to be disregarded now.

"No," she said slowly. "Not yet."

CHAPTER XXVIII

LORD CHARLES' FIRST STEP

"*PLEASE*, Minnie ! "

" Please, no, my good Charles ! "

Mrs. Bridport laughed her famous little laugh, in which her eyes quite disappeared behind a network of wrinkles. She was the greatest tease in London.

" Old Cossie does. Why can't you ? "

" ' Old Cossie,' as you civilly call her, is the daughter of a hundred earls. My father is a brewer, bless him ! And besides, why should I help you out in your nefarious schemes ? You are shameless, Charles Cressage. "

Lord Charles, who was looking very tired, and almost ill after the fifth sleepless night he had had that week, frowned.

" Don't try to be funny," he said. " I am quite in earnest. I am much interested in Cavaleone, and I want to meet her. So, of course, I come to you. To whom else should I come ? "

This question appeared to have weight, for Mrs. Bridport's face changed suddenly.

" Poor old boy ! But—I have nothing in the world against Kitty——"

" Good Lord, neither have I ! "

His face was supremely innocent as he spoke.

" Who but a brute *could* have anything against Kitty ? And what has she to do with my request to you ? "

She burst out laughing again, putting up her forefinger to look at him.

" Priceless, marvellous man, what would life be without

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you? Well, you wish me to invite Cavaleone here, and to invite you to meet her. That *must* mean that you are in love with her. Don't deny it."

"Deny it? Of course I don't. Of course I'm in love with her."

She watched him closely, her brown eyes reduced to mere black specks by the glasses of her lorgnon.

"What about Belle Bromley?" she asked at length.

Cressage shrugged his shoulders. "Your imagination does you credit, Minnie. You ought to write books."

He was indubitably that hateful thing a lady-killer, but, she reflected, as she had reflected so many times before, he was such a well-bred one.

Also, he was perfectly serious in his loves, each one obliterating, annulling, the very existence of the last one. All his life he had been saying in high sincerity, "I have never loved before." The man could not have helped falling in love even if he had tried, but, to do him justice, he did not try. And never once by a shrug, a smile, or even that exaggerated air of innocence by which some men shrewdly betray things, had he, as Minnie Bridport put it, "given a woman away."

"You are a cumberer of the earth," she declared, dropping her lorgnon. "You are vain and foolish, but you are not chattering; you are an utterly useless member of Society; you are in debt, you gamble, you have no more morals than a monkey——"

"But my manners are better," he put in politely, "and manners make the man. I never heard anyone say that morals make the man——"

She laughed. "Don't interrupt. You are useless to your country, to your family, to your friends, but—you are a dear, and I'll go and lunch with Lady Cossie this very day, and arrange to meet this girl. There, are you satisfied?"

He was, and having then got his own way, he promptly rose and took leave of her.

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Now Mrs. Tom Bridport was a thoroughly good little woman. She adored her big Tom and her twin boys, little Tom and David. She lived in the utmost contentment in her tiny box of a house, dressed on what her friends called nothing a year—for her father, the brewer, possessed the distinction, which would be appreciated by Mr. Henry James—of being an *unsuccessful* brewer. She was kind to her unattractive suburban relations, to her servants, to her husband's favourite cat, whom she really disliked.

It is something of a puzzle why this essentially good little woman did as she did about Beechy.

To be sure Beechy to her was the new soprano, Cavaleone. And a new Italian soprano is assuredly a creature able to take care of herself.

And yet—at the luncheon at Lady Cossie's, each of the girl's twenty-one years, years so few, so innocent, seemed to look out of her eyes at her new friend, and Mrs. Bridport said to her, as she ate a very wooden pear, "You are very young, Signorina."

This was the name they gave her at that time. Her surname was long, and to call her Signorina Cavaleone would, it appeared to many people, have taken hours. Whereas no one in even a partial enjoyment of his or her senses could have called her "Miss."

She was so thoroughly, triumphantly Southern!

That day she wore a little coat and skirt of red cloth and a small black hat.

She was beautiful, and she knew it. Also, she was as young as little Tommy and David, in other ways than mere ways of age. All this Mrs. Bridport saw, and yet Mrs. Bridport, without one qualm, asked her to dine the following Sunday, adding, "A great admirer of yours is coming——"

"Lady Alice Ashe?" asked Beechy, smiling delightedly.

"No—a man."

"Ah! Mr. Lon'dale?"

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"No. Guess again."

"The Signorina has so many admirers," laughed old Cossie Block, "that she can't guess which one you mean!"

If there was sarcasm in her words, Beechy did not see it. She merely frowned thoughtfully and guessed again.

"Mr. Wauchope?"

Mrs. Bridport raised her eyebrows. "No, but—do you know Lex? I'll ask him to dine too. He's a great pal of mine——"

Beechy went on solemnly, naming those whom she believed to be her admirers, and at last, rather shyly, she suggested Cressage.

"Right! Oh, but tremendously he admires you. Isn't he charming?"

"Very. His eyes—make one stop talking," she returned.

Lady Cossie clapped her hands. "Good! What a pretty speech! 'Make one stop talking,' do they? Ah, my dear, beware of Charles Cressage," she added, more gently, her old eyes less shrewd than usual.

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Because he is so fascinating, child!"

"But—I like fascinating people."

The two elder women exchanged a glance. They both believed in her with the absolute belief that real innocence usually meets. And yet neither of them dreamt of warning her more seriously against the man.

He was one of themselves, and she was an outsider, an opera-singer.

Beechy walked home to her hotel, where a small luncheon was ready for her. She had learned by this time to put no faith in Lady Cossie's powers of catering to her vigorous young appetite.

She liked Mrs. Bridport, and she was glad to be dining with her on Sunday. She was also glad that Lord Charles was to be there.

While she was eating her macaroni in her little sitting-room, Henry Pyecraft came in.

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It was the first time she had seen him for over a month, and she embraced him warmly.

"Dear Uncle 'Enry," she cried, holding him off at arm's length, and then kissing him again, "I *am* glad to see you ! 'Ow are you, and 'ow is Aunt Augusta ? "

Mr. Pyecraft cleared his throat.

"Well, my dear, quite well," he said nervously. "That is to say, I 'aven't mentioned to 'er that I was coming to see you to-day. The fact is, Beechy, you 'ave annoyed your aunt—seriously annoyed 'er."

"*Io ? Ma come, piccolo zio caro ?*" she asked in surprise.

"By—well, it's nine weeks since you've been to Fulham——"

Beechy burst out laughing. "But Uncle 'Enry—the last time I came she said she wish—a never see me again ! She said I *disgrrrrace* the family."

"I know, my dear, I know. But you must remember, she's very nervous, Augusta is, an'—and the papers 'ave spoken so well of you——"

The good man broke off, embarrassed, and turned his hat anxiously in his hands.

"You see, Beechy, them articles in the papers——"

Beechy wiped her plate with a bit of bread.

"I see, Uncle 'Enry. I quite see." She was silent for a moment repressing the flood of sarcastic nonsense that rushed into her mind. Then she added, "Shall I come Sunday for dinner ? "

Poor old Pyecraft was radiant.

He had not ventured to hope for such a generous disregarding of his wife's remarks on the occasion of Beechy's last visit, and he was very grateful to her.

He did not know that kindness being as natural to her as breathing, nothing in the world was easier to her than just such generosity.

Well-pleased, he went his way, and Beechy, who was singing that night, went to bed.

CHAPTER XXIX

A SMALL DINNER

THE dinner at Mrs. Bridport's was small. She and her husband and Beechy and Cressage were four, and there were beside Alexis Wauchope, the critic, and a girl named West, whose greatest claims to distinction seemed to be that she smoked more cigarettes than any woman in town, and that Lex Wauchope was supposed to like her.

Thus Beechy and Cressage were opposite each other at the pretty round table, while Little Lex sat between his hostess and the young singer.

A large, flat bowl of pink sweet peas was the only table decoration, so Cressage had an uninterrupted view of Beechy. And he made the most of it.

Beechy herself, tired after a dull day in Fulham, was a little pale and silent, but to a man as thoroughly in love as Cressage was, every mood has its charms, and he felt a distinct sensation of relief in realizing that she was not so hungry as usual.

Tom Bridport, a burly man with a very gentle voice, liked the girl, and produced for her benefit a few Italian words, remnants of a long-ago winter in Rome.

"Ah, *Roma*," she cried, clasping her hands. •

"*Sono Romana di Roma, io*—a Roman of Rome!"

"Funny how they still say that," observed Wauchope to Mrs. Bridport. "In the earliest days of the Republic the citizens of Rome used it to distinguish themselves from the Romans of the provinces. Isn't she beautiful?" he added.

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A small, delicately framed man, Lex Wauchope, with a mild face lighted by most romantically beautiful grey eyes.

• He went everywhere, knew everybody and everybody's history ; but while his goings and comings were open, and his tongue ready to answer any question, no one really knew anything about himself.

He was unmarried, and so far as anyone knew had never had a love affair ; and this remarkable fact lent to him a certain piquancy, for it was about love that he wrote his most whimsical, charming, poetic stuff. He published little, but his every printed article constituted a literary event, and his sudden revelations, always strictly correct, regarding the loves of great men and women of the past were regarded by senior historians as worthy of reference in their most solemn works.

For what Lex wrote about he knew. He wrote lightly, sometimes jestingly, always with a curious gracefulness, but his facts were concrete things, his very assumptions based on firm grounds.

When he met Beechy he bowed very low, his neat little feet close together in a dancing-school attitude.

"Mademoiselle," he said in perfect French, "I feel myself honoured."

Beechy's French was good as to quality, but nothing to boast about in quantity.

"*Merci, Monsieur,*" she said, smiling down into his eyes. And they were friends.

Afterwards Wauchope told the story of the evening to his one confidante, his mother.

"She wore," he said, "a green frock. A frock as green as an Alpine meadow in late April. The greenest frock I ever saw. And her black hair was plaited and twisted round her head over her ears—such pretty ears, little and pink. And she wore, of course, no gloves, which made her, in her summer-coloured frock, look like a vigorous nymph. All alert she was, with her blue eyes wide and

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awake, and her red-velvet mouth, like the leaves of a fine Jacqueminot rose, a trifle open as she looked round. I stood near her. She thought me a dear little man. 'Aren't they wonderful?' she asked me in slow French. She thought I was French. 'Who?' I asked. 'All of them—these beautiful Englishmen.'

"It was delightful. Dear old England, to have her men called beautiful by a Latin maid in a grass-green frock!

"I asked her if she admired Cressage, who had just come in, looking so damned *clean*, and she said quite simply, 'Oh, but he is the most beautiful of all.'"

This was the origin of Lex's delightful and witty baiting of Charles Cressage. It began that evening, and lasted until no one dared mention Beechy to Cressage or Cressage to Beechy.

It was quite plain to everyone that Lord Charles was head over ears in love. He made not the slightest effort to conceal the fact, either then or later. Which shows a certain wisdom, for whereas real concealment would have been impossible to him, he might easily have tried, thus falling into ridicule.

But Cressage was never ridiculous.

After dinner Beechy sang, which she, of course, should not have done; but she was so happy, and full of the joy of living, that she had to express her feelings.

Standing there by the piano, her hands clasped loosely before her, she made a picture none of them ever forgot. Wauchope accompanied her, a pair of huge round spectacles perched on his nose.

She sang a French song about May and love, that she had just learned, a little thing full of swing and melody. Then she sang the willow song from "Otello," saddest of ditties.

"Povera Barbara."

Her voice was beautifully tender, her eyes half shut as she sang. "*Salce—Salce—Willow, willow. Alas, poor Barbara.*"

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The contrast between the two songs was dramatically great, which she of course knew.

When she finished, Mrs. Bridport came and thanked her, and the girl who smoked cigarettes, opened her enamelled case with an air of relief.

"Look," whispered Wauchope to Beechy, "at the Most Beautiful of All!"

Without laughing, she turned towards Cressage, who sat staring over his clasped hands at the carpet.

The light falling on his smooth dark head was almost dazzling, and that same glossy smoothness had a strange charm for Beechy, the charm of the absolutely new. The heads she had known were either shaggy and ill-kempt, or smooth and heavy with oil, and these well-brushed English heads were very unlike those of either type.

The breadth of his shoulders too, attracted her, and when, feeling her gaze, he looked up and met her eyes with his sombre ones, Wauchope declares she started and put her hand to her throat.

However it may be, it is certain that her effervescing joyfulness was for that evening gone at that moment.

She went and sat down by Mrs. Bridport, and talked quietly to her for a long time.

Miss West, the cigarette-girl, smoked in silence, and Tom Bridport and Cressage discussed the new Bill.

It was a charming room, and Beechy was much interested in it. There were little tables covered with flowers, and many scraps of old embroidery and brocade.

"This," Beechy declared, her hand on a square of gold stuff, "came out of a church!" • She looked a little horrified, and everyone laughed.

"Do you think it wrong of me to have it?" asked Mrs. Bridport.

"No—but—I should wish to kneel if I were much in a room with church embroideries. I should, be found praying instead of—making tea, for instance." She was quite serious.

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"Do you like church?" asked Miss West suddenly.

Beechy looked at her. "But of course."

After a moment she rose and walked about, looking at the things she so admired.

Suddenly she held up her hands towards a picture in a corner.

"It is *Roma, è Roma!*" she burst out in Italian, "*la mia Roma cara! Ecco San Pietro—Castel San Giorgio—oh, bello, bello!*"

She turned, flushed with delight, her big dimple deep.

Cressage came to her. "Ah, yes, a charmin' sketch," he said. "I have—a lot of pictures of Rome, Signorina. Will you come to see them to-morrow? I must be off now. Have to go to the House," he explained to Mrs. Bridport.

She followed him to the drawing-room door.

"Do be careful, Charles," she said, her hand in his arm.

"Careful?" He looked vaguely at her.

"Yes. You—you will make a fool of yourself, if you are not careful—"

His face hardened, and he looked down his nose towards her. "What do you mean, Minnie?" he asked.

But Minnie Bridport was not afraid of him.

"I mean—well, anyone can see the state of mind you are in—*do* be careful——"

Her ugly, kind little face was full of anxiety, and he relented.

"Well—they may see all they like, but—no one but you must dare mention it to me."

"But—what do you mean to *do*?" she urged. "She seems a—a nice girl."

Cressage put his hand to his moustache. The hand trembled. "Yes. She is a—a nice girl. As to what I mean—I don't know any more than you do, what I mean——"

He went without finishing his sentence, and she returned slowly to her fireside, where Beechy was now

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keeping her husband and Lex Wauchope in a roar of laughter by a story about an adventure she had had when she first came to England, and was trying to find the National Gallery.

When Mrs. Bridport's guests had gone, she and her husband sat by the fire for some time.

"Tom," she said, "I am troubled."

"'Bout what, dear?"

"About Charles and—that girl."

"Charles Cressage?"

"Of course. Do I ever worry about any other Charles?"

The big man chuckled and rubbed his pipe lovingly.

"No, I can't say you do, my dear. But old Charles—nearly off his head, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, it ain't the first time, Min. He'll get over it."

And Mrs. Bridport, who as a good and kind woman should have been troubled about Beechy, did not give the girl a thought. All her anxiety was for that experienced old sinner, Charles Cressage.

"I know, I know it isn't the first time," she agreed, "but—somehow—he looked different to-night."

Bridport chuckled.

"He always does 'look different.' He has the most damnably tragic face, that chap—like St. Sebastian or one of those fellows. Oh, blow Cressage, and get me a whisky-and-soda, like a good girl."

Meantime Beechy, in a dressing-gown, was telling her good Scarpia about the evening.

"Lord Charles Cressage—eh was there," she said, unpinning her hair. "He makes eyes at me."

"*Per Bacco!*" grunted the old woman, "they all do that."

Beechy laughed.

"It is the fashion here, and I like it. But this one—he is very beautiful, and he is a most excellent actor,"

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she added seriously ; " one would think him dying of love ! "

She rose, and going to a table, looked over some notes that had come during her absence.

" Ah," she cried, well pleased, " here is one from Cricket ! "

CHAPTER XXX

ROMAN SKETCHES

"A MAN from Knoedler's, my lord——"
Lord Charles looked up. "Tell him to come in, Burns."

"Very good, my lord."

The room, a large, artistically furnished sitting-room in St. James's, was littered with open parcels, all of them rectangular in shape, and all of them flat. Obviously pictures.

Knoedler's man, as he put down his parcel, looked around in surprise.

"Good many pictures already, my lord," he ventured.

Cressage nodded. "Yes. What are yours?"

"Coliseum by moon——"

"Have two Coliseums already; don't want that. What else?"

"A view of the Campagna near the Baths of Caracalla, and a view of the city from the Pincio, my lord."

"I have the city from the Pincio. Let's see the Campagna one——"

He bought the pictures at once. Then, "I telephoned your people I wanted someone to hang some pictures for me at once——"

"Yes, my lord. I can stay now, if you wish."

His lordship did wish.

"Take down all the other pictures except those two portraits and the Constable, and get all these Roman pictures up as soon as you can, please."

"Very good, my lord."

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Cressage went out, and Mr. Archibald Guthrie Brown, of Knoedler's, set to work.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, taking off his coat, "whatever anyone wants with all these water-colours—and rotten bad that one of ours is, too!"

But the sketches stood out charmingly on the dark green walls, and when, at five o'clock, Beechy and the Signora appeared, Beechy's face, as she gazed round the room, was reward enough for her host.

"Oh, Rome! Then you, too, love it?"

To say the word was a luxury to the smitten man.

"Love it? Love—it? Indeed I do," he said fervently.

He was very pale in his dark blue clothes, the coat of which he had starred with a gardenia.

The Signora looked at him shrewdly, noticing that his eyes never left Beechy. There was little that her small black eyes did not see.

"And you live here," the girl said to Cressage, "surrounded by pictures of *Roma*!"

"I live—yes, surrounded by pictures——" he broke off short.

He was afraid of frightening her, and this, too, the Signora saw.

He gave them tea, he showed them books, prints, and his collection of knives.

Two miniatures near his writing-table he unhooked and gave to her. "My father and mother," he said.

She gave a little cry of pleasure. "Oh, the dear little things!" she exclaimed. "Never I see so beautiful babies!"

He stood watching her, his arms folded, and the Signora watched him.

"That child with the pony, there to your left, is my brother, Bridgewater. I—I wish you might see Bridgewater Hall."

"Your house?" she asked.

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"No; I only wish it were. I am only the third son. But I was born there——"

It was plain that he loved the place, and Beechy smiled at him. "I should like to see it," she said. "I like beautiful houses. I am going to Wychley at Vitsuntide. You have been there?"

"Yes. It is a dear little place," he answered. "Lady Cossie Bleck is a sort of cousin of mine. It will be dull, her party."

"Then I'll not stay," returned Beechy simply.

He laughed, showing white teeth under his dark moustache.

"I'll ask her to invite me down, if you think I could help prevent you from being bored——"

"Oh, yes, please. I—when I am lonely I am so miserable, and I hate the country——"

Women who hate the country were unadmirable to him, but in Beechy the characteristic was as lovely as everything else.

"How beautiful you are," he said softly, handing her yet another miniature.

"Am I really?"

"You know it."

She smiled. "Ah, this is *you*. You were a dear little boy," she said. "*Che bella famiglia!*"

They were a handsome family, the Cressages, and Charles was the handsomest of all.

He smiled absently.

"Come and see my—come in here," he said suddenly, drawing her towards a curtained door.

She went willingly enough, and found herself in a tiny conservatory full of orchids.

"How beautiful!"

"Signorina Cavaleone," he said in excellent Italian, "will you shake hands with me?"

Beechy stared, crimson with delight, her blue eyes almost black. "You speak Italian," she cried; "why did you not tell me before?"

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"Because—I—didn't dare. I—I feared I might say things you would not like—let me take your hand for a moment."

She held out both her hands. "*Ma sì, ma sì,*" she murmured, moved by his emotion. "How wonderful, that you should speak Italian!"

Cressage held her hands close in his for a moment and then pressed them hard against his lips.

She was far too Southern in nature to remain cool in the presence of so much passion.

She paled and drew away from him.

"Please," she said in Italian, "oh, I beg you——"

"Beatrice—I—surely you see that ——"

Before he had finished speaking Signora Scarpia came into the conservatory.

Cressage was very angry with her, and showed it, but the good woman was quite undaunted.

"I think we must go now, Bice," she said quietly, with dignity, and Beechy followed her in undemurring obedience.

Cressage, who had all the family temper, bit his lip to keep from expressing his annoyance.

"Good-bye," he said to Beechy, kissing her hand in Italian fashion. "I shall see you soon."

To the Signora he said stiffly, "*Addio, Signora.*"

When the two women had reached their carriage, the Scarpia said gently, "Bice, *cara*, you must be careful. He is dangerous, that man."

Beechy laughed. "Perhaps. I like them dangerous, you know."

During the days intervening between the visit to Cressage's rooms and the Whitsun holidays, Beechy saw Cressage often.

He came twice to her dressing-room; he appeared at Lady Cossie's and at Mrs. Bridport's; he bought a roll of purple tweed for her at Stafford House, and once he motored her and Mrs. Bridport to Ranelagh for luncheon.

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Beechy was happy with him, although something about him made her feel shy.

He had a way of coming up to her suddenly in a crowd, and murmuring to her in Italian. "I adore you," he would say, or "I love you, Beatrice——"

She could never recall the first time he told her he loved her. She seemed to have known it always. It came to her bringing no sense of offence, but a certain mingling of fear, shyness, and joy.

It was May, and she was twenty-one.

CHAPTER XXXI

LORD CHARLES MAKES LOVE

WYCHLEY, Lady Cossie Bleck's little country house, was near Box Hill. It was a one-story house, and its garden was delightful.

Lady Cossie, being poor, let the place for the whole year to one of her nephews, on the condition that at Whitsuntide he must clear out for four weeks, when the old lady came herself to enjoy the spring flowers.

This year Lady Cossie was not well, so her party was very small, consisting of an orphaned Eton boy, a great-nephew, named Chris Bidfield, his sister, a girl of eighteen, and Beechy.

"I feel old this year," Lady Cossie explained to Beechy; "next year I'll be young again, but now I am old. So I am not having a real party. But Lady Harrowstone has her house full as usual, and no doubt there will be some gaiety for you."

Beechy, to her surprise, felt rather tired herself, and was glad enough of a few days' quiet in the little place. The spring was a late one, so the may trees were still lovely, and narcissi and jonquils filled the grass in the old-fashioned way, while crimson ramblers on the north end of the house were already bursting into bloom.

Beechy and Chris Bidfield became fast friends at once. He was a nice, ugly little boy, with large red ears and a confiding heart, and he loved Beechy very much. The two walked together, her arm over his shoulders, for he had the courage of his convictions, and scorned to tell her that fellows of his age didn't usually do such babyish

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things. When she sang, he listened open-mouthed. Helen, his sister, was busy with a secret engagement with the chauffeur of one of her uncles, now abroad, so she was as unobtrusive as one could wish. Lady Cossie, looking indeed very feeble in her incongruous frocks, used to sit in the little arbour in the garden, and watch the flowers grow.

Two days passed very quietly. Then, the evening of the second day, as Beechy was dressing for dinner, she heard from the hall a voice that made her drop a pin she was putting into her hair. Cressage!

He was here, he would make love to her, and she told herself with Southern simplicity she wanted to love and to be loved.

Was she to love this magnificent Englishman?

For the first time in her life the girl felt timid as she went into the dining-room, a little late, for fear of finding Cressage alone. He was standing by a tall pink-draped lamp, bending down while Lady Cossie drew the stem of a rose through his buttonhole.

"Here she is," the quick-eared old woman declared, and holding on to his coat so that he could not without actual rudeness move. In the lamplight his deep flush was plainly visible to her.

"Caught!" cried Lady Cossie. "I mean you catch Charles making love to me!"

Beechy laughed. She was so glad to see him, so happy to feel her hand in his, that she laughed on and on. Lady Cossie was delighted. "He has come," she explained, half maliciously, "to stay till Monday. I did not invite him, and I don't want him, but here he is."

Cressage too laughed, and Chris Bidfield coming in at that moment from the garden, where he had been to make a nosegay for Beechy, joined in merrily.

"I say," asked the boy, "what *are* we all laughing for?"

Beechy put his flowers in the lace at her breast, and then laid her arm on his shoulder.

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"Because—because it is spring, and the garden is full of flowers, and the room is like a dream-room, and Lady Cossie is good to us, and—because Lord Charles has come!"

Her Italian accent grew stronger as she hurried on to her audacious conclusion, and after a pause she again held out her hand to Cressage.

"I am so glad to see you," she added in her own tongue.

His eyes closed for a second.

She wore white, and looked more like other girls he knew, for the moment, but she looked so beautiful, so sweet, so absolutely desirable and lovable, that he could not answer at once.

"Bravo," cried their old hostess ironically; "a modest creature like Charles Cressage needs a little encouragement, my dear!"

"Don't chaff, Cousin Cossie," he said gently, his beautiful eyes on hers. "Don't—spoil things."

And the old woman was silent.

There was only the one lamp lit in the long, low, faded room. The western windows, diamond-paned, were still glowing from the sunset, and from an open door the light from the hall flowed in over the ancient polished floor, ending where the gilded claw-foot of a chintz-petticoated sofa blazed back at it.

There were bowls of fresh flowers standing about, and mingled with their scent was the faded fragrance of old preserved rose leaves that stood on the tables in white jars with perforated tops.

There were cabinets filled with old family treasures, there were oval-framed portraits of dead-and-gone Blecks and Eustaces (Lady Cossie's mother and Charles Cressage's grandmother had been Eustaces and cousins) hung on the faded walls, and the curtains were tied back with broad, faded blue ribbons.

Such a room as cannot be made, but must grow with time and care and long habitation.

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To Beechy, who loved bright colours and gilding, the room was not beautiful, but its poetry she felt strongly, and she felt as she sat in it that she was learning. Roger Eustace, the man who lived in the house, had a good cook, so Beechy sat down to dinner feeling thoroughly happy.

Poor old Lady Cossie enjoyed it too, although she resented fate, whose cruelty forced her to let the house.

"All this is mine," she said, mournfully to Cressage; "these dear old spoons and forks, and that duck of a George II teapot on the sideboard. All mine! I wanted to take them to town, of course, but that brute of a Roger offered me so much for the use of them that I couldn't resist!"

Cressage nodded. "I know. My grandfather was the only one with sense enough to marry money. He hated my grandmother, too, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes. The Cressage men are all abominable husbands—and very bad lovers."

Cressage bit his lip. He was angry.

Beechy, however, was chattering with Chris, and had not heard.

When dinner was over Beechy said to Cressage, "Will you come out and see the flowers, Lord Charles?"

He hesitated, looking at Lady Cossie.

"Oh, Lady Cossie does not mind," she added hastily; "she has to rest a little after dinner before Chris and I have our concert, don't you, Lady Cossie?"

The old woman nodded. "In plain English, Charles, I like a ten minutes' sleep! Frankness, thy name is Cassandra Bleck!"

Beechy fetched her a small pillow from the sofa, and when she was comfortably settled in her chair, Beechy led the way into the garden.

Charles Cressage was forty years old, he had run the gamut of most sentiments, he had made love to Heaven knows how many women, of how many different kinds.

He had made love in houses, in gardens, in boats of

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different kinds, in steamers, in motors, once, even, in Paris, in a captive balloon, once even in church. But as he stepped out that evening into the old-fashioned garden with Beechy, he felt as shy and doubtful as a boy. His assurance was gone, his confidence in his own skill in the game, for now it was no game, but bitter earnest.

"What is the matter?" Beechy asked him.

He looked down at her, into the blue eyes of her.

"You know," he said, stammering a little, "I—I love you."

His face was white, and as he stopped speaking he caught his lower lip with his teeth to stop its trembling.

They stood close to the window, rather far apart, in the yellow moonlight. He was terribly shaken, and looked, though pale, younger than she had ever seen him.

The moonlight and also possibly the nature of his feelings obliterated for the time the tell-tale lines in his face.

"Beatrice—I—my God, what can I say to make you see what I mean?" he cried, running his hand through his smooth head in a way that brought a lock of it over his brow, and gave him a distraught look.

"I—this is Saturday, and since Wednesday, when I last saw you, I—I have been nearly mad. I literally haven't known what I have been doing. This—this—can't go on."

Beechy laid her hand on his arm. "Come," she said, "let us walk down to the sundial. Lady Cossie might see—your face."

He obeyed in silence, and when they had reached the little circular grass plot where round the foot of the old stone sundial pink and white wallflowers were planted, she went on quietly:

"You are excited," she said in her pretty English, "ver' much. But why? I like you to love me; I like you far better zan anyone h'else——"

There was a carved stone bench in the curve of the hedge just there, and he led her to it, kneeling in front of it when she had sat down.

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"Oh, Beatrice, Beatrice," he cried, putting his arms in her lap and his face in them, "help me to be good!"

• They were both silent for some time, while the only sound that broke the quiet of the country night was the baying of a very distant dog.

And from the wallflowers came a faint spicy odour, delicious, and homely, and pure.

Charles Cressage felt as if he were a child again. His love for Beechy was as innocent as that of a child for its mother. He moved slowly, for her hands were on his head, and looked up at her. "What have you done to me?" he murmured.

And bending down to him, she pushed back the dishevelled lock, and kissed his white forehead. Another minute, and he stood, his arms folded, staring moodily at the sundial, while Chris, who had been with his sister to post a letter, ran up to them calling loudly to Beechy.

CHAPTER XXXII

BEECHY MAKES LOVE AND MEETS A STRANGER

THE next morning Beechy rose very early and started off with Chris for a walk. She would have liked to go to Mass, but there was no Catholic church nearer than London, and the next best thing was a morning in the woods.

Chris was what his sister called an understanding little cuss, and Beechy knew that he would fall in with her mood of silence.

Up the glistening road they walked, he holding to her arm in brazen affection—his mother was an American, which may have accounted for his lack of British shamefacedness—his face very near her shoulder. They mounted a hill, and then striking off to the left followed a narrow path where some belated prinroses still nestled, and at length got into the woods.

The lovely lime-leaves glistened in the young sunlight, a great oak, gaunt and sere, towered above the firs, and somewhere out of sight a brook called back to the birds.

"Chris," asked Beechy, with many "r's" in the word, "don't you love the spring?"

"Rather," returned the boy. "I do so like flowers. I think roses are the nicest flower, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, and—I like wallflowers too."

As she spoke she blushed to remember why she liked wallflowers.

"Yes, wallflowers are jolly. Helen likes geraniums, but I don't, much."

BEECHY MAKES LOVE

They wandered down the slope and came to the brook.

"I say," began the boy suddenly, "I am glad you came, Beechy. It was so dull last year; nothing but grown-ups."

Beechy glanced down at him, not without pride in her age.

"I am grown up, Bat-Ear," she said, using his nickname.

"Of course you are, in a way," he hastened to apologise, "only you are young too. And besides——"

He broke off, "I don't quite know, but——"

She laughed and patted his hair. "Good little Young Etonian," she said.

"Lord Charles calls me that. *H'm*—do you like him, Beechy?"

"I do, Bat-Ear."

"Helen says he's in love with you. Is he?"

Beechy laughed again. "You ask *hccm*," she answered.

"Ah, here he comes—ask him now!"

She was teasing, for she knew the little boy would not dare. Cressage came rapidly down the slope, his hat in his hand.

"I say, Young Etonian," he said, as he kissed Beechy's hand, "I want to talk to Signorina Cavaleone. You run on ahead, and I'll take you to Dorking in my motor this afternoon."

Sorely tempted, Chris hesitated. "Do you wish me to?" he asked Beechy.

She nodded, and the boy ran away tossing up his cap. "I'll wait for you at the road," he called back with a rush of diplomacy.

They both laughed. Then, when he was out of sight, he turned to Beechy.

"My dear!" he said gently.

His hat lay on the ground near the brook, and the sunlight coming through the trees dappled his hair. He took her hands very tenderly and kissed first one, then the other. "Beatrice—I love you."

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"Yes," she said.

"And—and—what you have done to me Heaven only knows, but—I feel like—someone else——"

He was speaking the simple truth, and it meant much more than she could even imagine.

They had left their usual selves in town; he had left his weary, old pleasure-seeking, cynical self; she her self-centred, ill-educated, artistic self; and here in the clean country Sunday morning they each found a new, better nature. She smiled at him.

Sometimes in its eager vitality her face lacked tenderness. Now it was softened and lovely.

"I love you, too," she said at last, almost in a whisper. The inimitable scene in "Richard Feveril" flashed into his mind as she spoke. He forgot his age, his past, his future. For him there was only the marvellous, innocent present. He kissed her with something very near reverence.

"Let us go now, dear," he said, "or Chris will be tired of waiting." Leaning on his arm she climbed the slope, and they joined the little boy, who was whistling softly to himself at the edge of the road. . . .

That one day was perfect, and as such remained a beautiful memory always.

After breakfast they all went to church, and Beechy was surprised and delighted by the likeness of the service to some services in her own church.

After luncheon she and Cressage and Chris went to Dorking in his motor, as he had promised, and the drive was an excursion into the realms of Paradise. Cressage and Beechy did not talk much, for the motor was an open one, and Chris on the front seat had quick ears. But it was bliss enough to be together, and, together, to look at the lovely spring-decked world as they sped along. On the way home it grew cold, and Cressage wrapped the girl in a fur coat of his own. "I envy it," he whispered, and she blushed vividly, putting into the words more than he meant.

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For he was keyed up to a kind of ecstasy of mind that made him for the moment less earthly than she, young, Southern, and in love in the springtime.

"The Rector and Mrs. Maddison are in the drawing-room, miss," Roger Eustace's butler told her as they entered the house.

"Oh! I wonder——" She laughed. "Do you think I would like them, Meakin?" she asked.

"Well, miss—no, I 'ardly think you would, miss," he answered, not so shocked by her bad manners as he should have been.

"Come into the library, dear," put in Cressage, before she could say anything more.

The library was nearly dark, but a low fire still glowed on the hearth. Beechy stood by it, holding up one foot to the warmth.

"How cold it is!" she said. "Ah, what a day to-day must be in Roma."

Cressage did not answer. He was watching her.

"In England," she went on absently, "it change so quick. One hour warm, then puff!—it is winter again. I hope I have not taken cold."

Her mouth closed, she sang two or three nasal notes, laughing afterwards with content. "No, my voice is all right. On the tenth, you know, I sing Aida. Aida for the first time! Oh, it makes me so nervous. Suppose I break down—*cielo, mi fa tanto paura!*"

Cressage frowned. He was forgotten, and he was jealous.

"Beatrice, tell me you love me," he commanded.

She looked up, delighted, stirred, by the authority in his voice. "Love you? *Ma sì,*" she went on in Italian, "I love you, my love, my love!"

Running to him she threw herself into his arms, her face held up to his, not an English girl accepting only, but an Italian, giving as much as she accepted, warm-blooded, demonstrative, strong.

Cressage lost his head. He loved her, and under the

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innocent passion of her embrace his strange recent mood of exaltation was swept into oblivion. "Mine," he whispered between kisses, "my girl, my woman, my mate——"

And she ~~was~~ glad.

She loved, and she liked his warm human love far better than his respectful homage. She was kissed and she kissed, and clung to him with her strong young arms.

"Oh, I am glad," she said at last, drawing away from him, "glad!"

"My girl!"

"Yes. It is good to love," she said in Italian. "It makes one good and strong. It is good for everything. I shall sing better now.

"Now I can sing *Giulietta*! Aubépine said to me the other day that I could not really sing *Giulietta* until I loved."

"Oh, did he?" asked Cressage drily. He hated the idea of her love for him warming her voice for that little swine Aubépine. All the Cressages are jealous.

"Yes," Beechy answered, too wrapt in her own thoughts to notice his ill-humour. "Oh, *caro, caro, caro*——"

Under the light in her eyes he melted.

"My dear," he said, "my beloved! Beechy, I mean to be very good to you."

"Yes, yes, of course. And I to you——"

"You must understand me, dearest. I am a beast, you know. I—I am horribly jealous."

"Of course. All men are jealous. But—of me? No, not when I love you as I do."

"Well, I don't know. I loathe Aubépine, damn him. And that little bounder who sang *Faust* with you the other night——"

She burst out laughing. "Subiaco! Poor little Camillo—no!"

"Yes. And—for Heaven's sake don't call him by his Christian name."

BEECHY MAKES LOVE

"My dear—all artists call each other——" she began, but at that minute the dressing-bell rang, and he caught her to kiss her good-bye till dinner.

• There was a party that night, but Beechy could never remember of whom it consisted. There was a young man with red hair, she knew, who didn't know, think of it!—who she was, "never went to opera," he said, unabashed.

After dinner, just after the men had come to the drawing-room, Beechy again, by request, in her white frock of the evening before, was standing by a window talking to an old lady, the lids of whose eyes looked like raw beef, so that it was hard to appear unconscious of them.

"Jenny Lind," the old lady was saying, "was lovely, and *such* a lady. An artist, I used to say, but at the same time, *such* a lady!"

As she arrived at this point, Beechy regarding her solemnly, in a violent effort not to laugh, Meakin opened the door softly.

"Lady Charles Cressage, my lady," he said.

• CHAPTER XXXIII

LADY CHARLES

THERE was a moment's silence, and then as a very tall, very thin figure, with a near-sighted, forward poke of the head, appeared in the lamplight, Lady Cossie rose and went forward. "My dear Kitty," she said suddenly, "what a delightful surprise!"

Lady Charles gave a little, nervous, high laugh.

"Thanks, Cousin Cassandra," she returned. "I have come in a motor to ask you to let me stop the night. I wish to see Charles on business. How do, Charles?"

"My wife," remarked Lord Charles to Beechy and the old lady with the red eyelids, "is the only creature on earth who calls Cossie Bleck 'Cassandra.'"

Then he shook hands with his wife, and stood looking at her as if her sudden appearance caused him a mild sort of amusement.

Lady Charles was thin almost to emaciation, but red-brown and healthy-looking. Her neck was the neck of a plucked fowl, her eyelashes white, her nose red and hooked. She wore over her hat a very ugly grey motor-veil, and over her short coat and skirt a long, equally ugly light brown motor-coat.

Catherine Margaret Clifford Duplessis, only daughter of the Earl of Dundee, wife of Lord Charles Cressage.

Beechy's first curious sensation was one of amusement, but she felt as if she had been suffering for hours as the instinct to laugh came to her.

Lady Charles was not only ugly, she was almost ridiculous as she stood blinking in the strong light.

LADY CHARLES

"I shall have to be off by seven," she said, "for I have the house full of people. May Charles come and talk to me, Cousin Cassandra?"

- Lady Cossie nodded. "Of course, my dear Kitty, of course. Charles——"

The old lady's pronunciation of Cressage's name bore something very like command in it. He smiled.

"I obey, Cousin Cossie. There's a fire in the library, Kitty——"

An hour and a half later, the guests having gone in a group, very early, Lord and Lady Charles came back into the drawing-room.

"Thanks so much, Cousin Cassandra," Lady Charles began abruptly. "Oh—may I have some food? I left home just after tea."

She had taken off her coat, and stood revealed in a shabby dark blue coat and skirt.

Lady Cossie bustled out of the room. "My dear Kitty, I must see that your room is comfortable."

"Beatrice," said Cressage quietly, "come and let me introduce you to my wife."

Beechy came forward. "Kitty—the great Signorina Cavaleone," he continued. "Sit down, Beatrice."

Lady Charles shot at him a look of a kind of wild dislike, that sat oddly on her thin face.

"I have heard about you, my dear," she said kindly, turning to the girl. "That is why I have come."

Beechy had of course expected jealousy, anger, dislike. Bitterness, sarcasm, even rudeness would not have surprised her.

But Lady Charles' words and voice took from her all power of speech. She stood quiet, looking at, but not seeing, the fire.

"Sit down," Lady Charles went on, and Beechy obeyed.

"Yes—I have come on purpose to see you," she continued, rubbing her red, bony hands together. "He is furious with me. He'd like to wring my neck, wouldn't

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you, Charles? But he can't. Against the law. He is going away to-morrow to Paris. To stay for a long time. Aren't you, Charles?"

"Yes, I am going away, Beatrice," he said, his nostrils as white as chalk.

"Before he goes, however," went on Lady Charles to Beechy, with a little grim smile, "I wish to ask you a question, before him. *Did you know that he was married?*"

There was a short pause. Cressage did not move, he did not raise his eyes, but Beechy understood his position, and without a moment's hesitation lied for him.

"Of course I knew it," she said deliberately.

Lady Charles did not answer, and for several seconds the only sound was that of the leaping of the flames in the hearth.

"Then—well, everyone knows that I left him because he is so bad," went on the strange woman at last; "that—well, I have only this to say: it is a good thing for you that I heard about you, and then, yesterday, about his being here. You will hate me for sending him to Paris, but—you'll find the charm doesn't last when he's out of sight. It is chiefly looks."

Beechy fixed her eyes on Cressage.

"Do you allow yourself to be sent away like this?" she asked gently. "Are you a child, or an—imbecile?"

"Yes," he returned in the same voice, "I am—an imbecile. Well—this is bad," he said, his voice changing. "I have had enough of it. Good-bye, Kitty. Good-bye, Beatrice. Don't forget me——"

He went quickly from the room, and Lady Charles drew a long breath. "I do so dislike him," she said absently.

Beechy gave a short laugh. "So you seem," she said.

"My dear—if you knew him as well as I do——"

Beechy looked at her with much dignity. "I sink I know him more better than you," she said.

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Lady Charles rose, overturning a small chair as she did so, but appearing not to notice the accident. "My dear child," she cried kindly, "don't think that. Don't mistrust me. I am trying to help you, indeed I am! I know that he is in love with you, and—he is always charming when he is in love. I don't deny that for a moment. But—you are a good liar, but I knew you were lying—a man who will let a young girl fall in love with him under the impression that he is unmarried! My dear, *quelle canaille!*"

She spoke with an earnestness that convinced Beechy once and for all of her good faith, her good intentions.

But Beechy loved Charles Cressage. "He did not know I did not know he was married," she said, speaking slowly and carefully. "We never talk about it. People might have told me everything. He knew that. It was pure luck. That is the truth."

Lady Charles stood close by her, looking down. "That may be, my dear. Let's hope it is. But—you see, I knew he was married, and—I heard of you from several people; that you are young and good. So—I came. Try not to hate me."

Beechy looked up. "You make him unhappy," she answered primitively, "so, of course, I hate you. But," she added slowly, "you are good."

She was obviously trying to be just, and Catherine Cressage saw it.

"I try to be good," Catherine Cressage answered. For a moment the two simple souls were very near each other. Then—through the window came a whiff of cigar smoke, and Beechy rose abruptly.

"Thank you" she said, "and—good-bye."

She went to her room, and locking her door, sat down by a window. Cressage, she knew, was waiting for her in the garden, but she did not go to him. She believed (and it was indeed true) that he had never dreamed of her believing him to be an unmarried man; she saw how it had

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happened, and she appreciated his behaviour the evening before and that morning. He had believed that she knew, and yet—he had treated her with the utmost respect.

For this she loved him more than before, but her love was young, and her pain was great, and he had stood before his wife in a mental attitude that hurt her pride in as well as for him. •

There was not, she knew, much for a man in his position to do, but—the little he might have done he had overlooked, and not taken the trouble to do.

There he was in the garden, sauntering about among the flowers, his cigar a little beacon signalling to her to come and join him.

But she did not go.

At last he came in, and in a few minutes came a short knock at the door. She sat still, her heart beating hard. The knock was not repeated, and when at last she rose to go to bed she saw under her door an envelope.

“My beloved,” it said, “do not be cruel to me. I must go. She is right, you see. You must not love me. My loving you will do no harm. You have made me not good, but less bad than I ever dreamed of being. So I will not try to see you.” •

Beechy sobbed herself to sleep.

So he was good after all. As good as one of the holy saints. And she loved him, she loved him. All her life she would live on the memory of their short happiness.

When she awoke, he had gone to London, and Lady Charles, Lady Cossie told her, back to Beckenbrake.

CHAPTER XXXIV ,

SIGNORA SCARPIA AND IL SIGNOR LORD

ON the last night in June, Alexis Wauchope, after the second act of "Aida," went behind to see Cavaleone. "I found her," he told his mother, "walking up and down her room, poor Scarpia out of the way. When I told her through the door who I was, she let me in, saying, 'Oh, it's only you!'"

"She had sung magnificently, but she looked very ill indeed, her eyes hollow, her chin sharp. I had not seen her for a fortnight.

"'You are ill,' I said." (Wauchope never asked questions.)

"'Yes,' she said, with her beautiful directness.

"'Overwork.'

"'No, Lex.'

"She stood there looking at me from under her pearl cap—a plait as big as a cable on either shoulder.

"So then I said, 'Love?'"

"'Yes, Lex.'

"It had come sooner than I had expected it, but I had, of course, been looking for it. Women with physiqués like hers—I knew. She held out her hands, and I kissed them. Nice hands, cool and strong, with pink finger-tips. Poor Beechy! She looked straight into my eyes for a long time. She looked proud of it, which was fine, for I, of course, knew that the man was Charles Cressage.

"'Lex—he has been gone so long,' she said, as if she had lost her doll.

"'Paris,' I answered.

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" 'Do you know when he is coming back ?'

" 'No, Beechy.'

" She drew away her hands. 'I don't think I can bear it much longer,' she said. 'This music drives me mad.' It was the most direct confession of the effect of music on the senses that I have ever heard.

" Then she turned and looked at herself in her long glass. 'I am hideous, to-night, too. But I am singing very well, ain't I ?' she added.

" The 'ain't I' she had caught from Cressage.

" Then I left her, and the first man I saw on my way to my stall was Cressage."

Old Mrs. Wauchope heard all the details, but no one else ever learned one thing from little Lex.

" 'Hullo,' I said, 'you back ?'

" 'Yes. Have you been behind ?'

" 'Just come back.'

" 'How is—the great lady ?'

" 'What you swells call jolly seedy.'

" 'No !'

" 'Yes.' Then I looked away. Wife or no wife, it wouldn't do for her to get ill.

" He never moved during the third act. When she was called before the curtain he didn't even clap. Poor devil. Then he went. Behind, of course. And I went to the 'Savoy' and drank a small bottle of Pol Roger, by my wee self, and meditated on love and other trifles."

When Cressage found himself at Beechy's door he paused. If he went away even then ? She was young—*tout passe*. Then he heard her voice speaking to her maid, and he knocked.

She was sitting at her dressing-table, her hair unplaited, preparatory to be bundled up on her head for her home-going.

" Who is it ? "

Then she turned.

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"You may go, Mrs. Williamson," she said quietly. Then when the door closed she went to Cressage.

"I can't bear it," she said, putting her arms round him; "you must stay with me."

Then she burst into tears, and cried till she could cry no more.

Cressage was used to Beauty in Tears, and held her close and comfortably until the outburst was over

Then they sat down and talked.

"What did you do in Paris?"

"—Cursed. And longed for you."

"When did you get back?"

"At seven-thirty."

"And——"

"And—I love you. You missed me?"

For all answer she held up her arm, and he saw that she had grown thin.

"I couldn't sleep," she said.

"Nor I. Beatrice, my beloved—it has been horrible. Never again—my wife will get after us—she is bent on saving you——"

Beechy laughed. "Did you promise not to see me?"

"Certainly not. I keep my promises, dear. But—she inferred things. She liked you. Poor Kitty," he added with genuine kindness. "You liked her, didn't you?"

"No," said Beechy firmly, "I *wouldn't*. I—wanted to, but she—was 'orrid to you."

"Cockney," he teased. "But—don't think her 'orrid to me. She's been very good to me in her way," he went on, meditating. "I was impossible as a husband."

"Surely you weren't unkind to her?"

"Oh, no, never unkind. But so damned unfaithful."

She burst out laughing, the laughter ended in a sob, and back she flew to his arms.

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"Hold me tight, or you will melt away like a dream," she begged piteously, like a child.

Presently she sent him out to wait for her, and called in her dresser. An hour later they were at her hotel.

"My poor Scarpia is ill," she explained, as they went into her sitting-room. "She has such a bad cold. Besides, you were safe in Paris! I must tell her you are here," she added.

The room was full of flowers, and several letters and notes awaited the *prima donna*.

Cressage, left alone, walked up and down pulling at his moustache.

Here he was again! And in a moment she would be coming back to him. And she loved him. She knew her own mind. They had tried separation, and—it had done no good to either of them. *Vogue la galère*.

When Beechy came in, a long mauve tea-gown sweeping round her, he drew her down to a sofa beside him, and the *galère voguait, voguait, voguait*, until he had nearly lost count of things when the door opened, and old Scarpia, in red satin, came in.

"Buona sera," she said ungraciously.

Beechy rose. "Oh, Signora Evelina!"

There was in her voice a mixture of anger and deprecation that perfectly expressed her relations with the older woman.

"Send her away," muttered Cressage, pulling his moustache nervously.

"Please go back to bed, dear friend," Beechy began, but Signora Scarpia waved her words away with some effect.

"No, my dear. I love you, and I will not leave you alone with il Signor Lord."

The Signor Lord frowned, but smiled ruefully at the same time.

"Dear lady," he said, "you wrong me. Incidentally—are you quite fair to Beatrice who—"

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"Who is a young woman very much in love," retorted the unwieldy old singing-teacher firmly. "I wrong no one, Signor Lord Carlo——"

Beechy, touched, put her arms round her faithful friend, and kissed her.

"Listen, dear Signora Evelina," she said. "You are right in one way. I love Lord Charles, and he loves me. But—he's married, alas—so you see——"

Scarpia sniffed, but she held Beechy's hands in hers.

"That marriage is a safeguard against love and all other ills," she returned drily, "we all know. But——"

"Hush, dear!"

Beechy drew away her hands and laid one over the old woman's mouth. "Don't be cross. Lord Charles is not bad. He is good. He went away, and tried to stay. But he could not. And me—I was dying—you know I was dying," she added simply, "so he has come back. But—we are going to be very good. We are going to be—friends, not lovers," she used the unmistakable Italian noun fearlessly, looking straight at Cressage as she spoke. "Are we not?"

He was cruelly embarrassed. It was ghastly to have thus to justify oneself to this vulgar old matron in a red satin tea-gown. He hated her. But Beechy's question must be answered.

"Dear Beatrice," he said, "your wish is my law. Whatever you say shall be done."

She drew a long breath, triumphant. "You see, Signora Elvira? Well—yes. We are to be friends. And," to the Scarpia, "I give to you my word of honour."

The old woman kissed her and left the room without a word, her eyes full of tears.

"Why did you do that?" asked Cressage in Italian, as the door closed. "What in the name of God has she to do with us two? What has anyone to do with us two?"

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Beechy sat down by him.

"She has been very good to me," she returned, "and I love her. If she didn't love me—she wouldn't care. And I couldn't have her worried. Ah, my dearest, don't scold me! I am so happy to-night——"

Cressage was silent for a moment. "But—how can we be friends? I tell you plainly I can't do it. I love you, you understand!"

Springing up she faced him. "*Ma si, ma si!* You can. Of course you love me. But—we will be friends. You see, I—I know your wife."

He was honestly puzzled. "What has *she* to do with it? You seem to think our affairs concern everyone on earth but me! You don't think Kitty cares what I do? She was concerned only for you, to do her justice!"

"I know. But she was right. You said so yourself. Look——"

Opening the bosom of her gown she drew out a little white satin bag, from which, folded very small, she took the letter he had slipped under her door at Lady Cossie's. "'You see she is right,'" she quoted. "'You must not love me.'"

He was greatly touched. "You have worn that—*there*—all this time?"

"Night and day," she said. "It was all I had."

He rose and took her into his arms again.

"God knows where I got the courage to write that," he said, "but I did write it, so—we will try to stick to it. You are right. Kitty is right. Poor old What's-her-name—Scarpia, is right. All right, all you good people. Only I, the Bad Man, am wrong."

He made a funny wry face as he bent and kissed her hair. "I am always wrong," he added a little sadly, "but—I love the best woman in the world."

"Don't laugh at me. But, *Carlo mio*——" she had never before called him by his name, and the event carried with it its usual thrill—"it is so *easy* to be good when one

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is happy. And now you have come back, and I can see you sometimes—I shall be so happy. Ah, how I shall sing!" she added.

- When he had left her she knelt in front of a little blue and white statuette of the Madonna by her bed, and prayed. And for the first time in her life she forgot to pray for her voice and herself. •

CHAPTER XXXV

BEECHY MAKES A NEW FRIEND

LADY CHARLES CRESSAGE was sitting in the library of her house in Portland Place. It was a dark, rainy afternoon, and two big electric lights were aglow under their green shades, and a fire burned low on the hearth. The way different people take solitude is very useful as a key to their characters, and Lady Charles was of those who not only bear solitude well, but really love it.

She sat there in her father's solemn old library, which she had not altered in any way since his death made it hers, working with knotted brow and eager eyes over a pile of letters and leather-bound account books that looked depressingly dull reading. Beside her sat a small white dog, a dog with the jaw of a bull-dog, the ears of a fox-terrier, and, together with his blotted 'scutcheon, all the qualities a dog could have.

His name was Snob, because his one evil trick was a trick of snapping at servants and poorly-dressed strangers. This is supposed to be the outcome of a shamefaced memory of his own humble childhood, and the brute from whom many years ago Lady Charles had bought him.

We all have our faults.

Snob was asleep that rainy afternoon, his head on the skirt of his mistress' gown. And in the silence, broken only by the turning of the pages and the crackle of the fire, he dreamed.

Presently Lady Charles laid down the fountain pen with

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which she was adding up long columns of figures, and looked at the clock.

"Bless me!" she said, and rang the bell.

Then she worked till the smartly dressed head parlour-maid brought in tea. Lady Charles disliked men-servants.

Ellen drew the curtains closer and went out of the room hardly breaking the silence, and when the tea was quite cold Lady Charles remembered it and drank it.

"Snob, wake up. Tea-time!"

Snob growled sleepily, but sat up and tried to look alert.

"Those babies are not to be bankrupt this year," went on Lady Charles cheerfully. "Your friend Mr. Topp is a wonderful man."

Lady Charles treated her dog with more respect than she ever displayed for a mere man, and the dog, of course, responded to treatment. Dogs always do. The droop of his right ear meant, she knew, a lively pleasure in the financial welfare of the babies in question.

"But we need another room, Snob. Badly we need it. And then there's that bit of woodland behind the house—pines, Snob, and pines and sunlight make ozone, and ozone"—she gave him a large bit of toast together with the information—"is good for babies, particularly babies who have no fathers. I wonder——"

While she was wondering, Ellen appeared again, to say that a lady wished to see her ladyship.

"A—a foreign lady, my lady. She has forgotten to bring her cards, but says she met your ladyship at Lady Cassandra Bleck's."

"Oh! A very pretty young lady, Ellen, with blue eyes?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Ask her to come in here, please. And, Ellen"—Lady Charles looked rather shamefaced—"will you bring some fresh tea? This—is cold."

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Ellen gaped reproachfully at her mistress, caught red-handed in the drinking of cold tea.

"Very good, my lady," she answered.

When Beechy came in Lady Charles met her most kindly. "This is nice of you," she said. "I am so glad to see you!"

Beechy, glowing with happiness, was indeed a pleasant sight.

"I—I am so glad you do not mind," she answered.

"I—'ave something to tell you."

Lady Charles' face changed. "Something about—Lord Charles?"

"Yes. He—has come back."

The elder woman rose and stalked about the room in a restless way peculiar to her. "You have seen him, then?"

"Yes."

"Of course I knew he would come back. He refused to promise not to see you, so I knew he would try. But I had hoped," she ended roughly, "that *you* had some sense."

Beechy burst out laughing.

"Me, oh, no, I 'ave no sense. But do not be angry—I—may tell you all about it?"

"Yes—yes, my dear. Sit down by the fire and tell me."

Beechy sat down, and, the green lamplight and the red firelight glowing over her, told the story.

She told the truth, but she told the truth as it seemed to her; a truth so beautiful, so romantic, so utterly wild and impossible, that Lady Charles groaned internally.

"You see—love is such a terrible t'ing. It is so—strong. It is impossible to love and not see the person, and live. It takes sleep and hunger. All. And I am a Roman. So—when you sent 'im away—I began to die. He wrote me such beautiful letter. So good. 'E say 'She is right; you must not love me—you have made me

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not good, but less bad than I 'ave ever been, so I will not see you——' ”

Lady Charles stared, her light grey, pink-rimmed eyes round with wonder.

“ Charles wrote that to you ? ”

“ Yes.”

Charles' wife was silent for a moment, readjusting her ideas. If he had written it, he meant it, she knew, for she was perfectly just to him, and knew that he was no hypocrite.

Beechy watched her closely for a moment.

“ Yes—he wrote me that. Then—he went. And,” she repeated solemnly, “ me, I began to die.”

“ Oh, bosh ! ” snapped Lady Charles. “ And now that he has come back—you can see for yourself how much the letter meant—you begin to live ! ”

Beechy rose suddenly. “ Ah, yes. I begin to live. We are so 'appy,” she went on, her cheeks crimson, “ so 'appy. And we are both going to be so good ! ”

Most women would have considered her exultation as, under the circumstances, insulting. Kitty Cressage understood.

“ You are going to be good—you and Charles,” she said gently, grasping the situation with the quickness that made her, in spite of her appalling ugliness, so sympathetic. “ You and Charles Cressage are going to be good ! ”

Beechy looked at her.

“ Why do you speak like that ? ” she asked.

Ellen, entering with fresh-made tea, interrupted the answer to the question, but when the door had closed the girl repeated it, and got her answer.

“ My dear—don't you know that he *never* is good where a woman is concerned ? ”

But Beechy shook her head smilingly. “ He is an angel.”

“ Oh, dear me, dear me ! Do you take sugar ? ”

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"No tea, please, if you don't mind——"

So Lady Charles drank it herself, and made a mental note, as she did every time she drank hot tea, that she liked it hot, and would not forget to drink it promptly in the future, when she was alone.

"You—you are very obstinate," she began again presently, while Beechy still smiled at her angelic vision.

"You puzzle me. But—why have you come to tell me about it? After all, he is my husband. We are not divorced, you know."

"I know. And I came to tell you—because—I wanted you to know how good he is."

There was a long pause, and then Lady Charles said, while Snob settled himself on her lap, "I see. Well, will you tell me?"

Beechy leaned forward and held her beautiful hands to the fire.

"You see—I was unhappy, *ma infelicissima*. If it had not been for 'Aida' I should be dead. But 'Aida'—ah, he speaks Italian. You too?"

Lady Charles did. She and Lord Charles had lived together two years in Rome when they were first married, he at that time being First Secretary.

So Beechy went on in her own tongue.

"'Aida' was my ideal to sing. I know it all, all, and it is divine music. And I sang it, you know, the 10th, so I was busy, busy always, till then. They said I was too young, my voice not ready, but, bah! She who can sing 'Carmen' and 'Giulietta' can sing 'Aida.' And there were the costumes. They are very good, my costumes—they are historically correct. And I am an Egyptian in 'Aida,' not an Italian. I am slim and narrow and quiet. So I worked, and I lived. And the success—oh, it was a triumph! No 'Aida' is so good as I, they all said it, all. And for a day and a night I was happy. Then—the flowers came, and presents, which Aurelio would not let me keep, and the papers wrote about me, and they en-

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gaged me for, oh, so much money for next spring, and I am to go to America—and people buy my photographs, and the Princess of Wales had me come to her lodge and said kind things to me—and—I did not care.

“The sun shone, and beautiful day come every morning, and I was invited to dine at the Duchess of Liverpool’s, and I did not care. I was dying because he was not there. I lost three pounds. And I did not care to eat even the beautiful things in little dishes before the meals.”

A little downward sweep of her rosy fingers expressed in a wonderful way her utter misery and hopelessness.

“Then—the night before last—he came. And I told him he must never go away again. And he will not!”

She looked up with a radiant smile, and Lady Charles drew a deep breath.

“And—the goodness?” she asked.

“Ah, yes. Well, you see, Signora Scarpia, who lives with me, came in and—scolded him. She thought that I would be his mistress——”

“Oh, dear!”

“And then he told her no. I am well-educated me,” she explained, using the word in the Italian sense, meaning something like well-bred, “and I am a Christian. Oh, yes, I am a Christian, and I go to Mass and to confession.”

“You would have married him then?”

“Of course. I love him. But—there is *you*!”

She was far too happy to be at all bitter, and she smiled affectionately as she spoke.

Poor Lady Charles sighed.

“Yes, there is me. And so——”

“And so we are going to be very good friends and meet very often, but that will be all, we shall——”

Lady Charles held out her hand, to ward off more of the girl’s unqualified frankness.

“I see. You are to be friends.”

She rubbed her long nose until it seemed as if it must drop off. “Friends. Charles Cressage,” she added to

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herself and Snob, "is to be the friend of a woman with whom he is in love. Oh, dear, oh, dear!"

"I thought," said Beechy, her face falling, "that you would be glad."

"I am glad, my dear—for some things. And I like you, and—thank you for coming to tell me."

Rousing the drowsy dog she rose and walked about for a few moments. Then she came back to the fire.

"You need a friend," she said, holding out her hand; "may I be one?"

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE FATE OF BEECHY'S GARDENIA.

IT was at this time that Sargent painted his great portrait of Cavaleone. Beechy was at her most beautiful, because at her most happy. She glowed, she laughed, happiness and innocent vanity radiated from her.

She bought presents for everyone she knew, and Aurelio, going to Italy for a few days to see one of his sisters married, was obliged to take with him an extra box to carry the remembrances sent to Roman friends by the girl.

She and the watchful Scarpia shopped by the hour. They bought :

A pair of gold spectacle-rims for old Lamberti the maker of cane chair-seats ; a silver frame for Beechy's photograph for him ; a huge box of Fuller's chocolates (" to remind him of the chocolate he used to give me when I was little ").

Suits of clothes and frocks for Signora Marianna's children (the measures secretly obtained through old Agnese), sailor suits for the boys, and the gayest-coloured frocks for the girls. A string of gold beads for Chiarina, " whom I loved the best." A dress-length of scarlet silk for Signora Marianna herself.

For old Agnese a warm green shawl to save for the winter, a black silk dress-length, and a beautiful statuette of St. Joseph.

For Simeone a silver watch and chain, for was it not owing to that early songster that Beechy owed her whole career ? There was a beautiful silver Madonna and Child

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for Father Antonio, and an inlaid snuff-box, in which was folded a five-hundred-lira note for his poor people.

And for the nuns, who could accept no presents, went two large boxes of sweets, which they loved, and another bank-note.

"I ought to have another box if I am to take sweets for the orphans too," poor Aurelio cried ruefully, as they had tea at Fuller's.

Beechy laughed. "How good you are to me!" she said affectionately. "The poor orphans must have some sweets, *caro!*"

And she knew perfectly well that if she asked Aurelio to take one of the Zoo tigers with him as an offering to someone, he would at once set about getting a cage made.

Signora Scarpia, looking really rather imposing in a handsome grey gown and a toque trimmed with violets, drank her chocolate with pleasure. Things were now going to the good woman's perfect satisfaction. Beechy was well, happy, and the Scarpia's keen eyes had discovered that the girl was absolutely sincere in her intentions regarding Cressage.

The Scarpia loved Beechy as if she had been her own child, but being an Italian woman of the lower-middle class, she would not have been at all surprised had she found that the girl had deceived her. Love is worth lies, she would have said with a shrug in any other case, but Beechy was dear to her.

The old woman, a willing and excellent liar herself, had fully expected to come upon signs of secret meetings—upon letters, upon a thousand tokens of a hidden understanding, and unscrupulously she had searched for these traces. But it was in vain that she rose early for the early letters, and manœuvred for the first glimpse of the other posts. All flowers she opened, and foraged for notes hidden amongst them. Cressage did not write.

When Beechy went out alone, on two solitary occasions, the bulky Signora, who hated walking, slipped along behind

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her, hiding in doorways when she turned to look into a shop window, panting but rapid, until the girl had done her errand and reached the hotel again.

And once Beechy had gone to Asprey's, and the other time to Solomon's to order some flowers for Lady Cossie, who was not well.

So Cressage too was playing his part in good faith, and the Signora, amazed but happy, gave up watching.

Never had Beechy been so gentle, so unselfish as she was then, never so thoughtful of others, and her blue eyes were the happiest eyes in London, Lex Wauchope said.

That afternoon, at Fuller's, Beechy wore a beautiful new gown, of which she was very vain, and in which she looked her best; a long skirt and coat of heavily braided white cloth. It fitted close and, with her flat black hat, on the edge of the brim of which were clustered three gardenias, gave her something the air of a fantastic huntress. In it she should have ridden a white palfrey in a pageant. In her coat she wore a real gardenia.

"I thought you didn't like gardenias," observed Aurelio suddenly.

She laughed, an odd little laugh with a kind of bubble in it. "I didn't. But Carlo wears one always—so you see——"

Aurelio nodded. "*Si, cara*, I understand."

Beechy made no secret whatever of her love for Cressage, and Aurelio had seen it from the first. She had talked of Cressage a great deal, and while he was in Paris her misery, tragic in her, unconsciously expressed in a thousand half-theatrical gestures and intonations, had been for the eyes of anyone with whom she found herself. And more than once she had wept unrestrainedly in Aurelio's arms.

He bore it well, the young goldsmith turned secretary, as he would have borne torture by fire for her. He had been indeed her greatest help, for into his patient ears she

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poured by the hour her unrestrained and dramatic lamentations.

When, moreover, she told him of her pact with Lord Charles, he believed her at once.

"It can't last, you know," he warned, but in her good faith and Cressage's too he never doubted—a tribute she did not appreciate, for while she readily and without disgust suspected small treacheries in others, she took for granted that she herself should be believed, when she was telling the truth.

It is difficult for Anglo-Saxons to understand the Latins' standard of honour. It is different from ours, but it, nevertheless, exists, and is clearly outlined.

In the little matter, for instance, of making his friend's wife his mistress the well-bred Latin has a qualm, whereas the *ménage à trois* has become something like a national institution in England, and in some circles is accepted even with gaiety.

This arrangement honestly scandalises your Italian, who in consequence believes that in England no man knows—or cares—whose son his heir is. Naturally the Italian exaggerates, but the kernel of his belief is sounder than is quite pleasant.

Aurelio knew enough to be sure that trouble must come of the plan arranged by Beechy, but he was there and the Scarpia was there to safeguard the girl they both loved, and for the present at least Cressage's faith was good. To-day, however, Aurelio was sad and absent-minded, for he was leaving England the next day, for a fortnight, and in a fortnight, he told himself, much might happen.

"Oh, Aurelio, how I envy you!"

They had left the shop and walked along Bond Street towards Piccadilly, Aurelio, who dressed very well, nearly as pleasant to look at as Beechy. He was remarkably beautiful, the young Italian, with the velvety smooth brownness of a youthful Faun, and the most romantic golden-brown eyes in the world.

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Many people turned to look at them, for the *prima donna* was the celebrity of the season, and her pictures were on sale everywhere.

• "Look—Cavaleone!" they would say, and when she heard it Beechy invariably smiled at them. She loved the homage as she loved the sunshine, and she never could see why she should conceal her feelings.

Aurelio, for his part, felt none of the half-surly shyness an Englishman in his position would have experienced.

He was proud of her and her fame, and proud of being seen with her. The Signora, as delighted as a child with her new lace parasol, the handle of which, a carved parrot in ivory with two very crimson cherries in its beak, hurt her hand, gladly suffered to be beautiful. They were, in spite of Aurelio's faithful and hopeless love, a very happy trio that afternoon as they walked slowly up Piccadilly.

"Be sure you tell dear Mother Maria Maddalena," began Beechy at the corner of Hamilton Place, as a four-in-hand, very yellow, very imposing, nodding with gay hats and parasols, came towards them.

"It's the Signor Lord," exclaimed Signora Scarpia eagerly, almost waving her parasol.

Lord Charles, on the box, did not see them.

On high against the trees in the park, silhouetted sharply against the beautiful green, he sat like a god, driving his four celebrated bays. In his coat he wore a gardenia as usual, and as the drag passed the little group of Italians, he was bending over to say something to the lady beside him.

She, a beautiful white-and-gold vision, was smiling up at him; and his eyes were crinkled in a way that meant in him amused delight and homage. His eyes had this way of saying, "You amuse me keenly, witch, and your beauty fills me with joy, but you are a goddess, and I worship you."

Beechy stared at him, standing quite still. Then when he had passed, she tore the gardenia from her coat, and

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crushing it furiously in her two hands, threw it into the street.

"Oh," she cried, "oh—the brute, the beast—I hate him!" Aurelio and the Signor exchanged an appalled glance.

"Come, dear, we can't stand here," the Scarpia said.

Beechy's face was perfectly white, and its bony structure seemed to stand out under the flesh.

"Did you *see*, Aurelio? Did *you*, Signora Evelina? I—I will never forgive him, never——"

Sadly they accompanied the young fury home. They were grieved, but not at all surprised.

Senza gelosia l'amore non è.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE HONOURABLE MRS. BOB .

BUT that evening when Cressage came to take Beechy out to drive, he noticed nothing beyond a certain pallor, which he himself set down to the heat.

They went to an Italian restaurant near Covent Garden, and dined simply but well with things she chose. One of his good qualities was a comparative indifference to food and drink, and the little meal satisfied him perfectly.

"Why did the Signora allow you to come alone with me?" he asked, as they sat down in the small back room where a vivid lithograph of King Humbert stared down at them from over the mantelpiece.

"I—I told her I wished to. I—I want to talk to you," she answered. "I wish to ask you something."

But Marcantonio Bifi, the proprietor, a small dark man with white teeth and the most beautiful manners in the world, stood by them, and the dinner must be ordered. Bifi knew, of course, who his beautiful patroness was, for he in his turn was a constant patron of the opera, and Beechy had been to his restaurant once before.

"Oysters?" he suggested.

Beechy, very white and tragic under her small black toque with sharply cut wings like the wings in Mercury's cap, shook her head.

"No," she returned in a sombre voice. "Raw ham, vegetable soup, spaghetti with tomatoes and *roast kid*."

"*Sissignora*."

"Roast kid, then, and salad. And—zabajoni?"

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"Sissignora."

Bifi sped away, his shabby pumps noiseless on the bare floor, and Lord Charles asked her what zabajoni was.

"A sort of hot custard—with Marsala in it. When I was little," she added dreamily, "I loved it better than anything—and anybody—on earth."

He laid his hand on hers. "Greedy little beast," he said. For several seconds she looked silently at his beautifully-cared-for brown hand with the inconspicuous seal ring on the little finger. Then looking up she asked fiercely :

"How many women have you loved?"

He started, then he laughed, holding her hand closer in his.

"Child, child, what a poser for a poor old man!"

"You are not old. Tell me——"

Cressage looked vaguely about the shabby, clean little room. He saw the four vacant tables with their patched and darned cloths, their battered knives and forks. He saw the bare walls, the ugly green curtains at the window, the black marble mantelpiece, and the hearth filled with shavings of magenta paper.

Then he looked at Beechy.

If he had not loved her he would have known how to answer, how to please her. But because he loved her he blundered into the truth.

"My dear," he said gently, "I've loved a lot of women, but I've forgotten them all now."

"Ugh!" Her little grunt was indescribable.

"All men love—or think they do—a good many times," he went on, "and then when they really love, at last, they—regret all the others."

"Ecco, Signora, real Italian ham, and Greek olives, and salami from Bologna——"

Marcantonio Bifi set down the dishes and stood smiling.

When he had gone, closing the door against the intrusion of less distinguished patrons, Beechy again spoke.

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"And me—you will forget me, too," she said tragically.
"And you will wish you had not known me too——"

Cressage was utterly taken aback.

Jealousy was not unknown to him, but he had done absolutely nothing to make Beechy jealous, and that this was a variety of the passion unknown to him except by hearsay he could not doubt.

"What is the matter?" he asked gently.

Then she told him.

"Who was that woman with you in your coach to-day?"

So that was the trouble.

"Ah! where did you see us? That was Mrs. Bob Romney; but—surely you can't mind my seeing other women?"

Beechy laid down her fork. "I—I do. I mind your looking at them, and talking to them, and smiling at them—and wrinkling your eyes at them—I—I mind everything, Carlo," she burst out, her cheeks suddenly burning. "I—I want you all to myself."

She was splendid in her strong feeling, more splendid than he had ever seen her on the stage.

"Beatrice——"

He took her in his arms, and held her close to him, her emotion rapidly extending to him as he kissed her.

"You—you *madwoman*!"

His stammering, inefficient words were more convincing than a long, eloquent speech.

For a moment they clung together in all the bliss of an absolute understanding. Then the door opened and Bifi appeared, bearing a huge old-fashioned soup tureen. Before the two could spring apart the door was again shut, and they were alone.

Beechy burst out laughing and dashed the tears from her eyes.

"Poor *padrone*, he will never dare come back," she said.
"Ah, Carlo *mio caro*, I am so happy. Will you forgive me?"

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I felt so little, so humble, so far away from you to-day, you up against the trees, I in the street. And—she is beautiful! Forgive me, my treasure.” He pulled his moustache nervously.

“My dearest—you must know I love you,” he returned. “I love you so that I—I—hardly know myself. And as to Mrs. Bob Romney—she isn’t fit to touch your shoe. Fancy,” he added, in obviously sincere amazement, “your being jealous of *me*!”

Beechy gave another laugh and rose to look at herself in the green, uneven-surfaced glass over by the door.

Then she turned, her hands at her hair.

“Charles,” she said, suddenly serious, using his English name, “if you stopped loving me I should die. Die, understand.”

He sat staring at his knife and fork, a straight line between his eyebrows.

“If you love me—like that,” he began, but she interrupted by ringing the bell. “Hush! Not a word. I *do* love you like that! I adore you, but—ah, Signor Bifi, the soup, please.”

The proprietor smiled openly at him, a delightful smile of respectful sympathy and protection, and Beechy smiled at him. She was not in the least embarrassed, but Lord Charles was.

“Damn the fellow,” he said, when Bifi had again closed the door on them; “what does he mean by smiling at you like that?”

“Italians always enjoy lovers,” she said. “He is happy for us, and—I am glad he is. Smiles bring good luck, dear.”

The rest of the evening was very happy. After dinner they took a hansom and drove out Regent’s Park way in the moonlight, and by half-past ten were back with the Signora in Beechy’s ornate, flower-filled sitting-room.

The sunshiny, happy, triumphant days hurried by; the opera, of course, was over. Beechy’s last night had been

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an ovation, even her older rivals were cordial and kind to her, she was for the time a kind of queen of song, as the original-minded ha'penny papers called her. She lingered on in London, because she had promised a very high-placed old lady to sing at a charity concert the last week in July, the very last concert of a late season.

Many people had gone, but London was still full, and every night had its engagement to dine or dance.

"The girl is a dear," the old Duchess of Wight said, "and the story about Charles Cressage is a lie."

"The story about Charles Cressage is true," another powerful person declared, "and—why not? Kitty Cressage is an idiot and deserves what she gets. And the girl loves Charles, and—it is a pretty sight. A pity he can't marry her, for upon my honour I believe he would!"

"Ah, the singing-girl," lisped Mrs. Bob Romney, looking up through the delicate fringe of pale gold hair which, in spite of the dictates of fashion, still decorated her white brow. "Isn't she a lovely young creature? So pretty. And Lord Charles is in love with her, isn't he?"

She put all her remarks in the form of questions. Altogether an appealing, wide-eyed, helpless-seeming woman, a woman classified by the old Duchess of Wight as follows:

"Maudie Romney is as bad as she can be, has no more morals than a sparrow, no more mind than a chicken—the most idiotic woman in London. But she has two qualities: she never gets caught, and she never makes other people feel ignorant."

And on these two qualities the Hon. Mrs. Bob got on very well indeed.

She was always beautifully dressed, thanks to her maid—"a perfect wonder, my dear"—and the Hon. Bob's many and manifest sins created for her a pleasant little rôle of ill-treated wife which she used excellently well.

"Poor dear old Bob," she would say brightly, "he really is a dear, you know," and then he or she to whom she spoke usually felt a thrill of pity. Particularly if it

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were a he. She had known Lord Charles Cressage for years, in a very superficial way. He had sat next her at dinners once or twice, and once they had been on the same yacht at Cowes. But it so happening that when they met they had both been very busy with someone else, they had never interested each other particularly.

This June Mrs. Bob was interested in no one; and her nature being of those that cannot exist without a love affair of some kind, she decided to make him fall in love with her. It would be easy, she was so very pretty, and so very experienced. Meeting him at a dinner just before he met Beechy, she asked him to call to see an old book she had picked up somewhere with a coat-of-arms that she thought was his on its cover.

He called; the drawing-room was cool and fragrant with roses, and she looked very lovely. He knew her to be approachable, she had adorable eyes—slightly made up—and he liked her rather artificial air. Of course he made love to her, without even troubling to go slowly.

Someone interrupted them while he was holding her hand and telling her how lonely he was, but they met the next evening at a ball and sat for an hour together in a balcony looking over a garden where honeysuckle grew. She wore shell-pink, and looked really too fragile and helpless for this world. He made more love to her.

Two days later she went to his rooms for tea, accompanied by one Miss Spanning, a morose, flat-nosed old maid who knew her rôle to perfection, and at once produced a passion for books and sat for an hour in the library, where the low murmur of voices reached her through the heavy velvet curtain.

Lord Charles was enchanted. He believed himself to be falling in love with Mrs. Bob, and nothing could be pleasanter than a discreet affair with the lovely little blonde who never got caught.

But—the next night he met Beechy, and Mrs. Bob was at once forgotten.

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Alas that these matters are not always so simple as they might be! Mrs. Bob did not forget Lord Charles. But she was wise in her way, so she called Beechy the beautiful singing-girl, declared Beechy's voice was "quite too divine," and in her busy little mind spun webs.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE WHITE COTTAGE

TWO days before the concert at the Duchess's, Beechy and Cressage went to the country.

It was a beautiful morning, and the motor flew along the damp road as if it had wings. A motor is an unromantic-looking thing, but surely it more closely than any other vehicle can give to happy lovers a sense of the realisation of their fancied power of disembodied flight.

Everything had wings that day, to the two in the motor. They had run away from everybody, Beechy breaking an engagement for luncheon, he one at his brother's for dinner. They were going to be quite by themselves all the long day, and now it was only nine!

Richmond Park was a miracle of beauty in the sunshine, even the policeman who stopped them for speeding was a benevolent soul who accepted a very fat, gold-girdled cigar from the culprit-in-chief, and let them go with a friendly warning.

"Where are we going?" Beechy asked as they left the park at the gate of the "Star and Garter"; "you haven't told me."

He looked quickly at her. "Haven't I?" he asked a little embarrassed. "I—I thought I had."

"No. You only said 'the country.' Where are we going?"

"To a little place I have near the river—a cottage. Haven't been there for some time, and I thought we might have a look at it. I wired out to them to have lunch for

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us and dinner. It's a charming little place. I'll take you for a pull on the river afterwards."

"Oh, how perfect! I didn't know you had a cottage. It *will* be fun."

He bent over the wheel relieved.

It was so early that there were no people about but the people who lived in that part of the world, and the long white road was nearly empty.

Not far from Windsor, near Gatchett, a narrow lane leads down to the river, and here, in a quiet reach of the river, where there are no villas to be seen, no house-boats, was Lord Charles Cressage's cottage. The White Cottage, it was called. A long, rambling, one-storied cottage, with small windows and a red roof; a cottage standing in an old-fashioned garden; a cottage made of plaster and wood, but so overgrown with roses and honeysuckle that barely a vestige of its architecture was visible.

A most romantic little place, built thirty years ago by a sentimental stockbroker for the lady of his heart, bought twenty years ago by a scarcely less sentimental Oxford graduate named Charlie Cressage for the then lady of his heart, and kept on by him after his departure as a useful little box, though damned damp.

He was a trifle ashamed as he led Beechy in through the badly hung gate. He had been so often before, and they all said, "Oh, how lovely!"

Luckily she said it in Italian. And after all, it was the only place he knew where they could be quite free from prying eyes all the long summer day. The old woman who lived in the cottage all the year round had put everything in order, and they would, he knew, find the little rooms full of flowers. She was a wise old creature, Harriet Jane Taylor, and she never talked. For years she had been there whenever he came down, but each time, he knew, he would find a new parlour-maid.

Before the cottage door there was a little terrace of oiled red-brick, and at the corners of the terrace terra-cotta

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water-pots, brought from Italy, held great clumps of pink geraniums. Lord Charles hated red ones. And before them, as they stood looking down over the velvety lawn, the sweet Thames flowed softly.

"Oh, Carlo; what a heavenly place!" Beechy said, taking off her straw hat, and running the pins ruthlessly through the roses on it. "The sky is *nearly* as blue as in Italy!"

"Every bit as blue, darling. Nothing so blue as a real good English sky, I always say. Kiss me."

She put up her lips as a child does, but she was thinking of the scene before her, not of him.

"The trees across the river, whose are they, yours?"

"Oh, dear, no. They belong to Sir William Londale—the late Prime Minister."

"Londale? He must be Cricket's father. Oh, Carlo, is he Cricket's father?"

This was a new way of regarding the grim old man in question, and Cressage laughed.

"*Bambina*—how do I know? He has children, I know. One of the girls married one of the Swedish attachés the other day. Who is 'Cricket'?"

"Oh, he's the most adorable boy. A perfect dear. He writes me such funny poetry, and—oh, well, a charming boy. He was 'stroke' in his 'Varsity boat this year," she added, using the English terms with much importance.

Cressage smiled at her. A quite new smile this, that no one else ever saw. His mother, had she been alive, might have remembered it.

"Come in, dear, and see the cottage."

She loved it all; the deep window-niches, the rose-coloured chintz with green leaves all over it, the oak floor with rugs on it (like the floor at Wychley!), the queer old jugs and vases filled with garden flowers, the low bookshelves full of books. And on the walls the coloured prints of old coaching days. All, everything pleased her, and her enthusiasm pleased him. It was rather unusual to

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find, nowadays, a woman whom things sincerely surprised and delighted.

Harriet Jane Taylor, a blinking old woman with reddish grey hair and an asthmatic croak in her voice, gave her master the news of the place.

William Enmens, her nephew, who looked after the lawn and the garden, was married. He wanted his wife to do permanent parlour-maid's work at the Cottage, but she, Harriet Jane Taylor, thought better to say no to this plan. "I think better," she said primly, "to *change*."

Cressage frowned. "Yes, yes, quite right. Nothing has happened in the way of damages to the place, I suppose?"

"No, sir." Harriet Jane Taylor always called him "sir."

Beechy wandered from window to window while they talked, and afterwards she was taken to see the other rooms.

There were three little bedrooms, all done up in light chintzes, pretty pictures on the walls, pretty silk coverlets on the beds.

"Do you stay here often?" said Beechy.

He turned away. "No, not often. I used to at one time—used to bring people down for a day or two."

Beechy was far from ignorant of life, and if she had been asked what she supposed his life to have been, her answer would have been fairly correct, and very clearly expressed.

But this dear little place whither he had brought her seemed innocent and wholesome, and she thought nothing more of it than that it was an adorable place that was his. When they had gone over the small domain they had their lunch by the rose-hung window in the dining-room.

The new parlour-maid, who did not even know her employer's name, watched Beechy curiously.

"The lady's face is familiar-like," she said to Harriet Jane Taylor, as she waited for the asparagus. "I've seen it in a paper *sommeres*."

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"I dare say," returned the old woman 'drily.

There was chicken to eat, and delicate potatoes, and asparagus, and a raspberry tart with a junket.

Beechy enjoyed everything.

"It is lovely here," she said at last, as they sat over their coffee, and he smoked cigarettes. "I should like to stay."

Cressage lit a match, but it went out, and he lit another for the fresh cigarette between his lips.

"Would you?"

"Yes, for a week, or two weeks. I should not mind the loneliness if you were here. Is there a piano? Yes, of course. And then the river—running water is cheerful, it is the great lapping, struggling sea that is sad."

"Don't you like the sea?"

"I love to be on it, but not by it. It climbs and climbs, and crawls and crawls, trying to get out, and up on the land—it makes me feel very tired, as if I wanted to help it out as one does a dog. But this river here—it goes hurrying on, cheerily—yes, I love it."

Cressage did not answer. He played with the match-box and pulled at his moustache; then he drank more wine. Beechy, engrossed by her own thoughts, monologued on and on, without noticing his distraction.

Presently a clock struck two, and he jumped up.

"Come along, let's go out into the garden, shall we?"

It was warm, and the sky had clouded over. Beechy took her parasol and they went out. In the afternoon heat the flowers gave out their strong drowsy scents as they dropped a little on their stalks.

The china asters and the peonies alone seemed not to mind the heat, but the wallflowers drooped, the lilies looked delicate and pale, the carnations topheavy and sleepy. On the edge of the river stood a small arbour overgrown with creepers. Here they sat down in long chairs prepared by the careful Harriet Jane.

Beechy leaned back against a cool little green linen

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pillow and shut her eyes. "I am so sleepy," she said. "Do you mind if I go to sleep?"

She yawned widely, showing her glistening white teeth and a curling pink tongue like a puppy's.

"Of course I don't mind," he said absently. "Heavens, it's warm!"

Beechy watched him through her lashes. How adorable he was, and how noble, and how beautiful! She was perfectly happy. The heat to-day, she reflected, made him pale, and a lock of black hair fell over his brow as it had done that evening at Lady Cossie's.

Her eyes closed. The smell of wallflowers reached her as it had that same evening—the wallflowers round the sundial—she thought in Italian—"how does one say it in English? Ah, yes, of course, 'time-table'—"

She was asleep. . .

When she awoke she was alone, and the heat was very oppressive. She pushed back her damp hair, powdered her face with a tiny puff she carried in her purse, and yawned, stretched her arms at full length and yawned again.

Then, as she was about to go to look for Cressage, she caught sight of a letter lying on the floor, and picked it up. What pretty paper!

For a moment she stared at the little square mauve sheet with the complicated gold monogram on it in innocent admiration, and then her eyes fell on the name at the foot of it. Slowly she read the whole thing.

"So sorry, dear Lord Charles," the affected, pointed writing said, "to have missed you yesterday. Why didn't you telephone first? Will you come on Thursday at five? I have nothing of importance to say to you, but I feel that we are friends, and a sight of you will do me good. *Venez donc, ami!*

"Yours,

"MAUDIE ROMNEY."

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For a moment Beechy stood as if, as the phrase goes, she had turned to stone.

Then, dropping the letter where she had found it, she went slowly out into the dazzling sunlight of the garden.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"MADNESS IN THE BRAIN"

THE next day Beechy did not see Cressage. He called in the afternoon, but she was lying down, and told the puzzled Signora to tell him she had a headache. But it was not headache that made her pale and heavy-eyed. It was jealousy.

All the afternoon she went over and over in her mind the events of the last few days. Charles had told her that she was absurd, that night at the Italian restaurant, and she had known that he was right. His voice had expressed something more even than indifference to Mrs. Romney's charms, it had expressed a kind of scorn. Plainly she had understood that he had for the pretty golden-headed little lady none of the respect she felt in his every word to her. And for the time that had been enough; she had been quite comforted.

But in the mauve letter Mrs. Romney had "been so sorry to miss him"—"Why had he not telephoned?"—"She felt that they were friends"—"a sight of him would do her good." Much intimacy crowded into one small sheet of paper.

To herself Beechy called the Hon. Mrs. Bob several very shocking and unqualified names, but they did not greatly comfort her, for granted that Mrs. Bob was all these things, what good did her being so do?

Beechy knew that men liked such women, loved them. They were, she believed, brilliant in conversation and learned in all the arts of making men love them.

As she lay that afternoon in her darkened room, her

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tortured imagination pictured Mrs. Bob as the most enchanting of women. She was as pathetic as the woman in "La Traviata," as seductive as Carmen, as beautiful as Dante's Beatrice. She was as witty as Madame de Pompadour, an historical heroine greatly admired by Beechy.

All these things she was, and Carlo, *her* Carlo, was at that moment with her, in a rose-coloured drawing-room, alone!

If Cressage had come at five Beechy would have flown to his arms and begged for his forgiveness. But he had come at half-past three, thus, she concluded, saving time to keep his tryst with Mrs. Bob at five.

As a matter of fact he had utterly forgotten Mrs. Bob's note, not even noticing its loss, and when, towards six, he did appear at her door, it was because, unable to see Beechy, and moody and restless as he had been of late, he found himself in her street at that time, and remembered that she had asked him to call.

"At least she'll be glad to see me," he thought, as he followed the servant upstairs.

Beechy's demeanour the day before, after her nap in the arbour, had puzzled and distressed him. She was silent, brooding, and sullen-eyed. When he asked her what the matter was she lied, saying that nothing was the matter.

At tea she had hardly spoken, and when he asked her to sing she refused, saying that she was too tired.

When it grew cooler he took her on the river, and she lay on the cushions in the boat watching the crimsoning sky, and hardly hearing him when he spoke to her.

The man was utterly puzzled, and that he at last, after repeated efforts to sweeten her mood, gave it up and subsided into a silence as sullen as hers, is not to be wondered at.

He was an undisciplined, headstrong, spoiled creature, who never before in his life had found himself in his present position. He loved her with an almost violent force, and

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she had consigned him to the rôle of friend, pal, constant companion.

When this had happened to him before he had simply gone away. But Beechy he could not leave, because he loved her too much. At any price he must see her, but the price he was paying was a heavy one, and he felt his position, although he accepted it in good faith, to be a ridiculous if not a false one.

He pulled up stream for half an hour, and then shipping his oars let the little boat float back over the radiant water.

She sat hatless, gazing past or through him at the sky, the loose hair round her brow curling into little damp rings, her mouth set.

"Beatrice——" the infinite longing in his voice stirred her, and she started.

"Dear. What is it? Tell me. It makes me so horribly unhappy to see you so—so different. It frightens me. Is it—that you do not really love me?"

She frowned quickly, and then laughed. "*Macchè!* No, of course not. It is—it is that I am a fool, I suppose—that someone else made the world, and I don't like it——"

Reaching out he pulled the boat under the long branches of a tree that hung far over the water.

"Beatrice—let me come and sit near you," he continued with wonderful patience for a man of his temperament, "and tell me. Surely you can trust me?"

But she waved him away nervously. "No, no, let's get on. I hate being here in the dark. I want to see the sunset——"

He let go the branch, and the boat darted under its dipping leaves out into mid-stream.

He was very angry now, and said no more.

She sat dragging her right hand through the water, her eyes bent to her lap.

Then, suddenly, she gave a little cry. "Oh, Cricket! It is Cricket!"

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In her excitement she tried to stand up, and he bade her sharply to sit still, looking round as he spoke. On the bank near them, nearly opposite the White Cottage, stood a tall, slight, red-headed youth in flannels.

"Oh, please pull in—I want to speak to him," she exclaimed, adding in a calling voice; "it is me, Cricket — *Beechy!*"

The youth waved his cap. "You!" he cried; "*what* luck! How are you?"

Cressage pulled up to the landing, and Beechy held out her hand.

"I *am* so glad to see you," she said; "it's such a long time—I was telling Lord Charles about you this very day. Get in and tell me about Switzerland——"

But young Londale stood shyly there on the landing, his fiery hair glowing in the universal glow of things, and made no move.

"Suppose," remarked Cressage politely, "you introduce Mr. Londale to me!"

Beechy burst out laughing, apologised, and in another minute the three were floating along together.

"We have had luncheon here, and are to dine, and then we go back to town in the motor," Beechy explained, and Cressage, making the best of a bad job, let her chatter on uninterrupted. "Do come and let me show you the Cottage. It is too charming," she went on in her broken English; "that is, unless you are busy——"

Cressage listened in amazement. He could not be jealous of this ugly red-headed stripling, but how was it that her ill-temper had fled at her first sight of the red head?

Was it, after all—the thought smote him hard, so that he caught his breath—that she was too young to be really happy with him? That her youth cried out for youth to amuse it? He set his teeth hard, and then spoke very gently.

"Perhaps you would dine with us, Mr. Londale?"

"MADNESS IN THE BRAIN"

Cricket started and hesitated.

"Oh—you are very kind," he said, but Beechy burst in :

"You must; oh, yes, you will dine with us," she said; "that is ver' good plan!"

Her pleasure was perfectly genuine, and it was another blow for Cressage.

However, they dined quite merrily, Beechy doing nearly all the talking, and after dinner she sang.

Cressage, thoroughly unhappy, walked up and down the little terrace and smoked, while her beautiful voice floated out through the open windows.

"I will leave them together," he thought bitterly. "I am too old for them——"

Later it was he himself who asked the youth to go back to town with them in the motor. This he did, hoping that it might hurt Beechy, but it did not, and he saw it.

She was sincerely relieved to have the *lôte-à-lôte* interrupted, for she dared not mention Mrs. Bob to him, and she could not force herself to feign happiness.

Nine o'clock came, and Harriet Jane Taylor, whose expressionless face betrayed none of the surprise she must have felt at the unexpected appearance at the cottage of a second gentleman, curtsied to them at the door.

The homeward drive was rather noisy, for Beechy sat behind with Cricket, and they chattered and laughed without ceasing.

Cressage left them at the door of the hotel, and went directly to his rooms.

As he entered Mrs. Romney's drawing-room the next afternoon after having failed to see Beechy, the remembrance of the events of the day before gave an added tenderness to his reception of his hostess' greeting. She, at least, was glad to see him.

Beechy, that evening at a dinner at the "Carlton," led the conversation with one of her neighbours to the subject of the Honourable Mrs. Romney.

"Ah, yes, Maudie," the man said. "Yes, she is pretty.

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Lots of fellows have been mad about her. Yes, lovely hair, but rather too untidy to suit me. Bob? Oh, Bob's a good old ass—not half bad, but an awful ass, you know.”

“I have heard Lord Charles Cressage talk about her,” Beechy went on cheerfully, eating salad; “he admires her very much.”

The man to whom she spoke had happened in at Mrs. Bob's that afternoon. He gave a sudden chuckle.

“Yes, so I gather,” he said, in all innocence, for he had just come back to England from Canada, and had heard no gossip about Cavaleone and *le beau Charles* as some polyglot ladies liked to call him.

Beechy looked at him, smiling. “How did you—gazzer it?”

“I called there this afternoon, to take her a package from a chap in Canada, and there sat 'is ludship as snug as you please, holding some silk for her to wind. I've held silk for her in my day, too,” he went on. “She never sews, but she always has silk to be wound. Little devil, she's jolly attractive—something about her—hard to explain—prettiest hands I ever saw, little white things no bigger than a child's.”

“Perhaps that's why she winds silk,” laughed Beechy, adding, “Mrs. Morrow, your other neighbour, has very pretty hands, too. Better talk to her a little, 'adn't you?” She went on with her dinner, talking now to her other neighbour, one of the French Embassy youths, with the greatest composure. What they talked about she could never recall.

When she went home she found roses and a note from Cressage.

“Beloved,” he had written, “I was so sorry to miss you. How is your poor head? May I come to-morrow morning? The days when I cannot see you are unbearable. Telephone me when you come in; I will stay at the club until twelve. I love you more than the whole world.—Charles.”

"MADNESS IN THE BRAIN"

Ordinarily his letters, written in faulty Italian, filled her with the tenderest joy. His mistakes were delicious to her, a badly spelt word would be kissed.

But to-night she burst into a sneering laugh, tore the paper into small bits, and tossed it into the waste-paper basket. Then she rang.

"You may have these roses," she said to her maid, "the scent makes my head ache."

After which, with an angry glance at the telephone, she went to bed.

A little later he called her up, to be told by the maid that the Signorina had gone to bed and was asleep.

In the morning he came.

She put on a tea-gown and went to see him.

He stood by the window.

"I wish to know," he began abruptly, "what has happened to make you treat me like this."

She raised her eyebrows affectedly. "Like—what?"

"You refuse to see me. You will not telephone to me. You—you treat me like a dog. *Why?*"

Never had she so admired him as at that moment. But she laughed and picked up a book that was lying on the table. "You are absurd," she said.

"That," he returned, "is true. I am absurd—or I have been. I am not going to be absurd any longer. I love you, and you know it. I refuse to be your plaything any longer. If you love me you must cease this—nonsense. If you don't love me, I will go. That is all I have to say."

Her heart beat furiously at the ring in his voice. He did love her, or he could not speak like that. And she adored him. She made a step towards him, and as she did so the telephone bell rang.

She unhooked the receiver. "Yes—yes—yes—I am Signorina Cavaleone—ah," she gave a little laugh of greeting, "thanks so much, Mrs. Romney. Yes, me too, I 'ave wished to know you—thanks—yes, I 'ope so—yes,

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Lord Charles is 'ere—but of course, 'of course! One moment——"

She turned and said, so carelessly that he was completely hoodwinked, "Mrs. Romney wishes to speak to you."

Mrs. Romney was alone; her old man had deserted her for the day and night, and would Lord Charles come and dine with her and Miss Spanning, and take them on to the Duchess' concert to hear that exquisite Cavalccone sing? His servant had told her where he had gone. Would he be a perfect dear, and have mercy on two lone women?

He looked round as she spoke.

Beechy was bending over a great sheaf of lilies that had just been brought to her.

"Look," she whispered, "from Cricket!"

Yes. Lord Charles would be enchanted to come.

"At eight-fifteen, I suppose? But, dear lady, the pleasure is all on *my* side—good-bye, until this evening, then. Yes. Good-bye——"

He was in the state of mind when a man would be jealous of a wooden Indian.

"Ah, young Londale sends you flowers, too, does he? A conquest worthy of your bow and spear, my dear——"

"He is good and kind, and I *like* him," she flashed back furiously.

Cressage laughed as very angry people laugh

"Good! Well, he will no doubt follow his lilies shortly, so I'll be off. Good-bye. We shall meet at the concert."

"Yes."

She found him suddenly quite calm.

"You must introduce me to Mrs. Romney," she said politely. "She was very nice to me over the telephone, and I should like to know her——"

He stared, then bowed. So she was no longer even jealous? "I shall be delighted," he said; "you have one or two things in common. *Arrivederci.*"

CHAPTER XL

THE DUCHESS' CONCERT

OLD Mrs. Wauchope, on the terrace of the Casino at Aix-les-Bains, received a fortnight later the following letter from her son :

" My dear little much-missed Mother,—Are you sitting like a quaint olden-time lady in your silken gown and lace cap among all the gilded vice of our beloved old Aix ? Do the wicked coquettes and cocottes stand and stare at you in surprise at your survival, as they did last year ? And do you love it all (the place, not the sinful people), as much as ever ?

" It is a heavy responsibility to send one's charming young mother all alone to Aix. And your going there puts me in an awkward position. How explain that you—well known to be goutless, and innocent of all the ills that other people sport when bent on frivolity at furrin' watering-places—insist on going to Aix for July *because it amuses you* ? No one ever does anything because it amuses him or her. Real ladies go to Aix for gout, to Marienbad—God bless him!—for their digestions, to Paris for a change of air. I alone of all young men have an old mother who goes to Aix on sprees by herself !

" Lady Charles pities me, but she alone. By the way, she sends you her love and best thanks for the cheque (which you forgot to sign, and for which I gave her another),

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and will write soon. She says Sky Hill is doing very well, and I should think it might well be. Friday of last week Esther Duchess gave a concert for it in her gilded halls, and Cavaleone sang. She sang divinely, and looked like a figure of tragedy as she did it. A marvellous evening. You remember what I told you about her and that enchanting rascal Charles Cressage? Lady Charles told me, so I know it to have been true.

"Well, trouble is brewing there. In the first place, Cressage looks ten years older and as black as your hat (your best black velvet one), and in the second place, he has been having a violent affair with Maude Romney. Last night, as I was sitting humbly wedged between Lady Ascot and the very richest recent American, in came Charles with Maudie and Mary Spanning in one of her old frocks, and Maudie was radiant, and so helpless and sweet as would have done your heart good to see. She beamed, she drooped, she waggled her eyelids, she went through all her little tricks quite nicely and without a single misstep.

"They sat near me, and I watched them. I had not seen my dear Beechy, as she lets me call her, for some time, and when, after the Spanish baritone chap, she stepped out on the stage, we all simply roared with delight. She is a very wonderful girl, and, I believe, good. She wore black, and looked more nearly plain than I had ever seen her.

"But she sang! She was billed for two songs, the dear old Habanera, with its nice old-fashioned deviltry, and 'Fors è Lui.' I, of course, *versayed des larmes*. It was amazing. And then when we roared like starving beasts for more, she silenced us with a gesture, and said, peering down at us in our semi-obscurity, "If Mr. Wauchope will kindly h'accompany me——"

"And behold your little Lex. A proud moment for your son's, mother's son! My old ladies heaved and loosened me from my pen, and up I went straight into

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glory. She thanked me so charmingly, and led me to the piano, and then we talked a little, and discussed what I could play by heart, and then she sang again.

"She sang Fauré's 'Serenata Toscana,' and one of Landon Ronald's songs, about a road, and dear old Gounod's dear old 'Ce que je suis sans toi.' Ah, the way she sang that made me sit up and wonder. I knew she was suffering horribly, and it hurt me so that I nearly stopped playing and bade her be silent.

"The audience clapped till its hands nearly dropped off. She sang a Neapolitan song, and then she stopped.

"Up went the lights, and she made her pretty, half-shy curtsies that the gallery gods so love. I, too, made beautiful bows. And as I bowed I watched our old Lothario. It is absurd to call Charles Cressage old, but compared to her in her glorious youth, he with his five hundred great loves seems a worn-out dotard.

"(You will observe, *Mütterchen*, that I am gnawed by an unhappy passion for her myself!)

"There he sat, Lothario, frowning savagely, his damned good-looking face as white as your hat. (Your frivolous one with the violets in it.) And she, too, looked at him. She would not sing again, and Wierzbicki played, according to the programme. He played all over the place, as usual—no restraint; but he is great in his way, and we clapped.

"Then came Loria in magnificent voice; truly the glory of the century, as far as voice is concerned, and she sang like an angel.

"After her we made an awful rumpus, but she was going to sail for America the next day, and refused with her quarter-of-a-century-old childlike gesture, expressing that her poor little throat was tired.

"Just in the midst of the uproar in came a note for Cavaleone. She gave it to me, and guess whom it was from! *Lady Charles*! Surely the ways of the Great God Chance are past finding out.

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" 'Will you not, my dear,' Lady Charles wrote, 'make a tiny little speech for Sky Hill? There are many millionaires in your audience, and after singing to them, surely you can ask what you like. The Duchess has telephoned me to ask you to do this.

" 'Your friend,

" 'CATHERINE CRESSAGE.'

" It was dramatic.

" The concert was over, the audience, now brightly lighted by those distressing gilded candelabra the old Duke was so proud of, chattered preparatory to rising.

" 'Yes,' I said, 'do.'

" She nodded, drawing a deep breath. The rest you will have seen in the papers, that's all I will tell you.

" I struck a sharp chord on the piano to attract their attention, and she went to the extreme edge of the stage. Behind her hung an old yellow satin brocade curtain. The effect of her, all black, but her beautiful head and shoulders, and arms, must have been magnificent.

" 'Ladies,' she began, in a frightened voice, 'and gentlemen.'

" There was a hush you might have seen.

" 'I have just receive a letter from Lady Kitty Cressage'—everyone sat up with a little jerk.

" Then she read the letter, if you please, every word of it, in her funny accent, each word distinct. When she paused there was a roar of laughter. Oh, for rank, human emotionality commend me to an English after-dinner audience! She had not meant to make them laugh, and for a moment stood looking puzzled.

" Then she went on: 'About Sky 'Ill—you all know what it is. A beautiful house on a hill in Surrey where mothers—without—without 'usbands may leave their babies while they work, and come to stay whenever they can. Lady Kitty has told me. The Society pays the

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tickets. And—there are so many mothers without 'usbands——”

“Not an ‘h’ did she have in the whole speech. Luckily we were all of the very double cream of English society, or we should have been shocked about the ‘usbandleless mothers. A suburban audience could not have borne it.

“On she went, explaining just a little about the place—and a most sensible charity it seems to me—and at last she ended with the words, ‘So now I will sing little French song—“*A vingt ans*”—to remember you all of when you had twenty years.’ And then I’m blessed if she didn’t translate the dear old song from beginning to end, seeking each word in a kind of exquisite hesitation as if fearing to wrong the poet by the least departure from his meaning.

“When she had ceased speaking some idiot began to clap, but was promptly snubbed into silence by his neighbours, and she sang. You know the song, and you can imagine its effect on her kind-hearted, rich, sentimental, overfed audience. At the words ‘*Comme on pleure à vingt ans*’ (she herself is just twenty-one), someone gave a loud and hideous sniff, but no one laughed at it.

“And when she ceased, there was a long pause, and then came such a roar of applause that I hoped the gilded chandelier might be shattered. (It wasn’t.)

“They stormed and called her name, and clapped for six or seven minutes, I should think, but she stood quite still, her face as white as snow.

“Then she took up my hat, and went down, and—handed it round, if you please, herself, quite simply, as if she were a girl at a country fair.

“Old Schwarzmänn was there, and Lydermeier, and each of course wrote on a bit of paper and gave her that. Edgar Wight followed suit, and several others, and the rest gave money. If I told you what that blessed damozel picked up, you would not believe me, but the papers were not far out for once.

“It was a strange scene. She was serious—no, more

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than serious—she was tragedy in person. She did not smile, her mouth was very red and very set. She did not thank anyone. Old Harmon said he felt that charity herself had come not to ask, but to demand her share of the world's wealth.

"And it is true that we were all impressed.

"When she came to Maudie Romney I watched closely. Her face never changed, nor did she recognise Cressage beyond giving him the grave bow she gave all her acquaintances. He put money into my hat, and so did Maudie, in silence. When she had been all round the great room she went to the Duchess, made her a little curtsy, and gave her the hat. It was full of gold, notes, and twists of paper promising gold and notes.

"The Duchess kissed her loudly on both cheeks.

" 'I think someone ought to kiss me,' I whispered in my lonely heart; 'it's my hat.'

"But no one kissed me. No one ever does but you, *Madame ma mère*, and I took my hat, squashed it, and went to get a drink. . . ."

"*Thursday.*

"At this point, mother dear, I was interrupted by a brute of a telephone message; someone clamouring for an article I had utterly forgotten, so I will now go on.

"An hour later came what to me, with my little eye, was the *clou* of the whole thing. I sought out, if you please, by the lovely Beatrice—what a magnificent name it is, Beatrice Cavaleone!—was walking with her in a room about half a mile from the concert-room. She was very silent, and suddenly out of her silence she said, 'Lex—I am very un'appy.'

"*Lex*: 'I know. I have seen.'

"*The Prima donna*: 'I am jealous, Lex.'

"*Lex*: 'Jealousy is a flame of fire.' (She didn't know that another great man had said it years ago.)

"*The Prima donna* (very seriously): 'It is the devil.'

"*Lex*: 'Why don't you fight?'

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"*The Prima'donna* (without the usual pretence of non-comprehension) : 'I don't know how.'

"It was very pathetic, mother. She told me, then, they were to have been friends. (Charles Cressage her friend!) And she was so happy. Then suddenly this yellow-haired woman, this . . . her nouns are forcible, but unfit for your ears. She hated Maudie Romney. She wished Maudie would die of an apoplexy. She would like to kill her.

"*Lex* : 'Why don't you? Kill her, I mean.'

"*The P.D.* : 'I—after all, she is a great lady, and I—I sold papers in Rome, in boy's clothes, ten years ago——'

"We walked on, her hand on my arm, until we came quite unexpectedly, for me (for I always get lost in that awful gilded wilderness of a house), to the conservatory. I had a feeling that we'd find Maudie and her young man there, and I'm blowed if we didn't.

"Under a palm, of course, a becoming light, a tinkling fountain within earshot, and the rest. Trust Madame Maudie to spy out all the obvious points for a situation! Pretty she certainly is, though I know her head is stuffed with pumpkin seeds instead of grey matter, and in her blue frock she looked quite lovely as she smiled up at him. Cressage, poor devil, was enjoying himself. She was making violent love to him, and in spite of his evident misery, he couldn't help enjoying her homage. They didn't see us, and for a long time (it seemed) we stood and looked at them.

"Then he took her hand and played with her naughty charming fingers. 'Let us go back to my quiet little drawing-room,' she said softly, 'and talk it over——'

"'Hurry,' I said to my splendid lady, 'now's the moment.'

"'What shall I say?' she whispered.

"'Anything—the truth—but—hurry.'

"Up she went to them as straight as if she had been an arrow sent from an old yew bow.

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" 'Carlo,' she said gently, in English, for the enemy's benefit, 'come—I want you to take me home.'

"He rose, startled out of all his self-possession.

" 'Home ? ' he said.

" 'Yes.'

"That was all. I hurried up to cover his retreat; he stammered good night to poor little Maudie, for whom I felt a truly Christian sympathy, and off they went together,

"The Honble. Mrs. Bob does not lack courage. She turned a very queer colour that might have been green but for her *patina*, and said to me, 'What a splendid couple, aren't they ? I like poor old Lady Kitty, but——'

"Rather fine in its way, wasn't it ?

"Your devoted son,

"LEX."

CHAPTER XLI

LORD CHARLES TELLS THE TRUTH ABOUT HIS OTHER LOVES

AND that, so far as Beechy is concerned, was the end of the Honourable Mrs. Bob Romney, for the time being.

A week later the Signora and Beechy went to Italy, and ten days after that Charles Cressage followed them.

The reconciliation had been complete. Beechy's apologies as full-hearted as was her jealousy; she concealed nothing, attempted no mitigations, made herself in her furious humility a worm in the dust. Cressage held her in his arms which had ached for her, and forgave everything, blaming himself for things he had not done, loading his own shoulders with quite imaginary faults. They kissed and wept, kissed and wept again. His nerves had been as strung-up as hers, and in his doubts and fears about his age had given him pangs of which she could not even guess.

"I am old," he said, "and you are divine youth incarnate. Can you love a man of my age who has lived the life I have?"

And she closed his mouth with kisses against such blasphemy.

"You look ill, ill," she wailed, "and it is my fault."

"It is mine for being a fool and letting you imagine things——"

And so on and so on. All will understand except those poor, excellent beings who have never made fools of themselves and then been forgiven.

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They sat in the little sitting-room until far into the small hours, and then Cressage, after half a hundred last kisses, made her wake the Signora.

When the Signora, whose own nerves were not quite what they might be, under the strain of Beechy's misery, had dressed and come into the sitting-room, Cressage rang the bell.

A sleepy waiter appeared, and the Signora, with an ostentatious yawn, bade him bring tea and bread and butter.

"I know it is very late," she said (he was an Italian), "but I am extremely tired, and must have some." As she spoke she gave an angry glare at Cressage, a touch of Machiavellian realism that won for her as the door closed a delighted hug from Beechy.

"Oh, you darling Signora Evelina," the girl cried, "what an angel you are. How Aurelio will laugh!"

"Aurelio is back?" asked Cressage.

"Yes. He returned the day before yesterday. Oh, Signora Evelina, where are my presents and letters?"

The Via del Violino had written as one man, through the elegant medium of young Simeone. It was grateful, the Via, and flattered, and delighted with its gifts. Above all was the Via proud of its great child. And it sent to her as a souvenir and token of affection a large gilded vase on which, in the midst of a bright blue medallion, a golden-haired Juliet bent from the window to kiss a green-legged, black-haired Romeo.

"Isn't it lovely?" Beechy asked, her hand on the monstrous thing, and Cressage admitted that it was.

Father Antonio had written, and Sister Ippolita, the studious nun, for the whole convent. The Sisters and the orphans, children all of them in their powers of enjoyment, loved the sweets. And dear Sister Lucia was dead, and the dear Reverend Mother was to have an operation for the cataract, and Beechy must pray for her.

"Do you—pray for her?" asked Cressage awkwardly.

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"Of course."

He looked at her, his dark eyes full of the expression that only his dead mother might have recognised.

"Pray—for me too," he said, still awkwardly. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I do—always."

He took the two women to the station the next day, gave them books and papers, and then walked slowly back across the park along Piccadilly to Dover Street. He was not quite sure where he was going, but on he went along Bond Street, Brook Street, and through Regent Street to Portland Place.

At the corner of Langham Place he paused for a moment. It was a dull, thunderous afternoon, and the broad street was nearly empty. Lord Charles, five minutes later, rang at his wife's door. When, a fortnight later, he saw Beechy at her little villa near Frascati, he told her about his call.

"She was very good to me," he said.

"So she was to me. But—why did you go?" she asked.

She was sitting on the wall of the stone parapet below which spread the sealike waves of the Campagna. It was a golden afternoon, but under the thick-leaved trees the long path by which they had come from the house lay in black shadow.

Cressage looked at her. "Well," he said, "I don't quite know. She is a good woman, you know, and—I felt good."

She nodded. "I understand. *Ah si, capxisco jo.*"

"I knew that—that Maudie Romney would talk—and—and others—and I wanted her, Kitty, to know. She was," he added slowly, "pleased. She was also surprised."

"I don't see why she was surprised."

Beechy, who wore a white linen frock and a brown hat covered with poppies, stuck out her lip. "Why was she surprised?"

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He laughed. "Well—I am a very good man these days, ain't I? That's enough to surprise anyone. She sent you her love."

"Thanks."

They were silent for a time. She was perfectly happy in having him with her, he was perfectly happy in watching her. She was so much her most true to type here in her little old villa; so thoroughly a Roman. Had he not known Italian he could never so thoroughly have understood her, but his familiarity with her language gave her that perfect freedom from self-consciousness that alone permits one to be one's real self.

In the villa at the end of the *allée*, the good Scarpia was taking her *siesta*. In a little time the sun would set, and there would come a simple dinner on the terrace under the stars, and he and Beechy would stroll about together listening to the nightingales.

Then, at half-past ten, they would climb the high steps to the house—the steps the stone balustrades to which were completely hidden by a mantle of ivy—and going into the bare yellow hall, light their candles and go to bed.

Cressage had seen his room, a small, clean place, bare of all but absolutely necessary things, and decorated by two old portraits of some ancestors of the owners of the house: a mincing lady in an insufficient blue velvet bodice and an old man in a fur cap. There were two windows overlooking the garden, and one opening on to a little court, across which he had heard, while he dressed after his journey, Beechy and the Signora calling to each other from their adjoining rooms.

The Signora, thoroughly satisfied of his morality, cared, he knew, not one button for conventionality, and he was free to stay as long as he liked.

These things he thought of as he watched her perched on the parapet.

"How is Snob?" she asked suddenly.

"Well, thanks. A consistent person, Snob. He hated

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me when she bought him, eight years ago, he growls at me now."

They both laughed.

"I have my contract for America," she said. "I go in October. I—I shall miss you."

He nodded. "And I you. But—somehow——" He paused and gazed for some time at the violet shadows that were creeping up over the wonderful rolling plain below them.

"She is right," he said at length, rising and going to her. "You are reforming me!"

She looked up into his serious eyes. "Nonsense! Reforming you—from what?"

She was marvellous to him with her passion, her jealousy, and her utter content in his friendship. Marvellous, until he looked at the greater miracle she, or something in her, had wrought in him.

That her innocent mind was what it was he could, after all, nearly understand, but that he, Charles Cressage, should be happy in the mere comradeship of the woman he loved more than he had loved any woman in his whole life seemed little less than a miracle.

But this he could not tell her. He knew, moreover, that the continuance of their happiness depended on him. As long as he was content and at peace so would she be. But, something told him, once he lost his self-control her peace would go too, and with a crash. For a moment, as he watched her, he almost longed to see what would happen—and then with an angry shake of his head he chased the idea from his mind, and peace fell over him again.

"My family," she began presently, her dimple showing as she smiled, "has cut me off."

"Aunt Augusta?"

"Aunt Augusta. Such a letter! I wonder who told her. She knows all about you—and more than is true. She tells me I am living in sin."

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"Hell!" muttered Cressage under his breath.

She burst out laughing. "Oh, the ugly word! Poor Aunt Augusta, she is a dreadful woman, but I am sorry for her."

"Did you write to her?"

"No. She wouldn't have believed me. I wrote to poor, good old Uncle 'Enry. He believes me, and I told him the truth. It will make him happier. Aurelio told him about it, too. Aurelio visited them before we left."

"Aurelio is a good sort," said Cressage.

After a moment he added, "When we go back to England, dearest, we must be careful. People do talk, you know."

"Yes. But I don't care," she returned tranquilly. "Uncle 'Enry knows, and the Signora, and Aurelio, and—Lady Charles, and Lady Cossie——"

He made a face. He knew what old Cossie Bleck thought.

"We must be careful, however," he repeated. "You see, darling, I have such an infernally bad reputation——"

She turned half-way round and put her cheek against his shoulder, thereby cocking her hat over her right ear and squashing several poppies.

"Poor darling," she said in English, "what a *shaaame*!"

He kissed her.

"Here comes Aurelio."

Later, as they walked in the garden after dinner, they returned to the subject.

"Were you really so very bad?" she asked.

"I don't wish to boast, *carissima*," he returned, his arm round her waist, "but—I suppose I was."

"And now?"

"Now I am good. Am I not very good?" he added half seriously.

"Ah, but very."

After a long pause she began again in a careful undertone.

"But it wasn't *real* love?"

LORD CHARLES TELLS THE TRUTH

Poor old question. And—should he tell the usual poor old lie ?

He had told it many times, but now it stuck in his throat.

"Yes," he said gravely, "I suppose it was. There are more kinds of love than there are days in a man's life, beloved. And I was always sincere, thank God. Only—this is different, and—this is the best of all."

She was content with his answer, for she realised its truth, though she did not understand it.

"The best of all," she repeated, leaning against his shoulders.

"Yes. You see—if I were free—you are the only woman in the world to whom I would give my name, and whom I should wish to be——"

"The mother of your children," she finished for him quietly. "I understand, dearest."

"Yes—I told Kitty that, and—she was glad. She is a very good woman, Kitty. If it were not absolutely against her belief she would divorce me, I know, so that I might marry you. But—she doesn't believe in divorce."

Beechy smiled with the superiority of those to whom that belief is as natural as their belief in the impossibility of adding a cubit to their stature.

"Of course there is no divorce," she said carelessly.

"Then—even if she *had*?" he asked, standing still.

She shrugged her shawled shoulders.

"My dear, I couldn't. The Church doesn't admit it."

Her voice was perfectly conclusive, but a sudden curiosity seized him.

"If—I were not the saint I am——" •

After a few seconds she answered him.

"Of course I would have," she said simply, "but it would have been mortal sin."

That it was her actual belief he knew, and somehow it troubled him. Mortal sin which she would have committed, "of course," for him.

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He kissed her hand.

"Give me the rose in your breast," he said, and she obeyed him. "I shall keep this," he said.

He was, he quite sincerely felt, a very good man indeed that evening. He was also a wonderfully happy man.

After he was in bed he could hear her merry laughter and chatter with the faithful Scarpia. In the darkness he kissed the rose.

CHAPTER XLII

TWO LETTERS

EARLY in October Cavaleone went to New York, where she was engaged at the Metropolitan Opera House for the winter season. The summer and the early autumn had been perfectly happy for her. She and the Scarpia stayed at the Villa until the last of September, Cressage remaining with them until the beginning of the month.

People have been said to be possessed of a devil. Surely at that time Charles Cressage must have been possessed of an angel.

As the long warm days passed, he passed through a phase of self-admiration and amazement into one of quiet happy taking for granted of his own peace of mind. They sat by the hour together in the cool old house, in the neglected, romantic old garden with its beautiful ilex-trees; she practised every day, she embroidered—she was making an altar-cloth, all crimson and gold, for the convent—in the cool of the evening they walked.

They were together from early in the morning till the early good-night hour, and he had never been so happy in his life.

The peasants thereabouts grew well-used to the sight of the beautiful *Signore forestiere* who walked about with the beautiful *cantatrice*, and they liked him, for Cressage was the soul of idle good-nature, and he had been given a smile that seemed to mean all sorts of wonderful things.

Beechy did not go to Mass often, but every afternoon she

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went to the old church in the village to sit in the purple and gold from the west window, and Cressage went with her.

"I like sitting in the wonderful colour," she said; "it makes me feel like an empress."

And as she sat there in her white dress, her radiant eyes looking at the altar more in friendly comfort than adoration, she seemed to him something infinitely higher and more beautiful than any empress who ever lived.

Once, in forgetfulness, she held her hand, wet with blessed water, out to him at the church door as they went in.

Then, as she knelt, he looked shyly at his finger-tips on which the water still glistened. He wished, ah, how he wished, that he was young and innocent, and an unquestioning believer in the beautiful old religion that taught her to do the exquisite superstitious things he found so charming.

She lost her brooch, and lit a candle before a small figure of St. Antony, gaily muttering prayers as she did it. When she found the brooch another candle must be offered, and she spoke of it as of a visit to a kind old thing of an uncle, rather a bore, but so good to one that one mustn't be ungrateful.

And it pleased her to carry armfuls of flowers to the Madonna.

These things she did, not over-reverently perhaps, but with a friendly grace that enchanted him. Her ignorance of religious matters was great, but her church was to her an integral part of life, not an affair of Sunday mornings and dull duties.

They had visits, too, at the Villa.

One day a splendid motor appeared at the gates just as Beechy and Cressage were going for a walk.

"*La Signorina Cavaleone?*" A tall, well-dressed young man sprang out, smiling at Beechy with eyes very like her own.

"Yes—I am she——"

"Then, *bella mia cugina*," he returned, kissing her

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hand, "let me introduce myself. I am your cousin, Leopoldo Cavaleone—your most humble servant."

He was the son of her old enemy and benefactor, Prince Cavaleone, who had died some months before. And he was delighted to find his famous relation so young and beautiful.

As soon as she began to earn money with her voice Beechy had written to the old prince thanking him for his help and returning his last cheque. To this communication he had paid no heed, but the cheques had ceased at once.

Dino, the young prince, spoke of this, and Beechy told him, quite without bitterness, that she was very glad to need no more assistance from her father's people. The young man was very charming in his way, regretted his father's obstinacy about "Cousin Giulio's" marriage, and declared that he himself was almost perfectly sure he could remember Beechy's mother, whom he had seen when sent to play with the del Grillo children.

"I seem to remember a very pretty, fair young lady," he said earnestly.

He was a nice boy, with a passion for "lo sport" and for London-made clothes, and as he was deeply in love with a lady old enough to be his mother, and about whom all sorts of the most awful tales—"all untrue"—were told, Beechy thoroughly enjoyed him.

One day he asked her about Cressage.

"Your *fidanzato*?"

"No. He is married, and I know his wife. But I love him more than anyone in the world," she answered serenely. He believed her to be Cressage's mistress, but he did not care at all, and indeed greatly admired the older man, and asked him for his bootmaker's address.

A happy month!

One day all the orphans were brought out in a tram-car that Beechy chartered. Forty-three little orphans, their faces shiny with soap, and three nuns to guard them,

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and Father Antonio to guard the nuns. They had their dinner at one o'clock in the garden, and such a dinner as it was !

After it two orphans were sick under a tree, but they were glad they had eaten so much, nevertheless.

Father Antonio, very old and frail now, sat in a comfortable chair in a cool place, and Beechy herself waited on him. It was pretty to see her, full of anxious hospitality for everyone, bent with all her mind on making the day happy for them all.

The culmination of joy was when the ices came, beautiful vanilla and raspberry ices in red glasses, and each orphan carried home her glass to drink her milk from in the future.

When they were tired of walking about and picking flowers, Beechy sang. She sang her very best, standing seriously by the piano, and her programme had been carefully selected. She sang old religious songs her accompanist had found for her, lovely, simple things over which the orphans' eyes grew round and solemn. The three Sisters sat, their heads bent over their folded hands, and listened with delight, for it was pious music, and, as such, not sinful.

Cressage was deeply touched by the whole day. Never before had he seen Beechy so gentle and tender, never had her beautiful voice seemed so exquisite.

When they had gone, laden with flowers, back across the Campagna in their tram to Rome, he drew her into his arms, and held her there without kissing her.

"My dear," he said. That was all, but she understood.

And when his last day there came they parted almost as simply.

"Good-bye, my dearest," he said, "until the last of September."

"Good-bye, my Carlo——"

When he had gone she went up the steep hill to the church, and sat there for a long time thinking about him. They met again in London just before she sailed. She

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was to be away until March, five months, but the charm of the summer was still on them both, and they parted calmly enough.

"Remember," she said at the station, "if you cease to love me, I die."

"When I cease to love you I shall be dead," he returned seriously.

Poor Beechy, she was the worst of sailors, and for four days she lay moaning in her bed, forgetful of everything in the world but her own misery.

The Signora, on the contrary, defied the waves and enjoyed the trip, and the mystery it pleased her to maintain about Beechy when questioned by the curious.

No one, not even the representative of the "New York World," succeeded in getting any information from the new soprano's companion. Indeed it was always a sorry day for a reporter when Beechy was out or indisposed to see them. For the Signora hated reporters, and was abominably rude to them always.

New York! How they loathed it, the three Italians.

They had learned to love London, for London has its own wonderful atmosphere, and its beautiful buildings, and its air of being a city with a history second only to that of Rome.

But New York! The vaunted blue sky, with its sharpness and coldness, its narrow vaults of streets, its pitifully hideous houses and its neglected streets—a horrible city void of history, of charm, of romance, good only for the rapid accumulation of dollars. The pride of its marvellous growth was not theirs, and that was the trouble. It did not matter to Beechy that the city had grown like Jack's beanstalk. The results of its growth remained the same, and it chilled and depressed her, and she hated it. Her success, we all know, was phenomenal. The hateful clear air was good for her voice, and she had never sung better, and the American public is generous.

She was the darling of it and of the flamboyant press

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all the season, and for singing in one or two of the royal palaces that masquerade, in Fifth Avenue, as private houses, she made several small fortunes.

At Christmas she was taken south in a private car, and at Palm Beach she had the honour of refusing two millionaires and a billionaire from Chicago, whose hobby was the collecting of souvenirs of fair frailties who had been the playthings of kings. A nice man, this pork-packing person, as New Yorkers called him (though he had never had anything to do with pigs in his life and had made his money on the Stock Exchange), and when Beechy refused him, went away leaving her as a souvenir a fan that had belonged to an old favourite, Madame de Pompadour.

This fan she used in "Manon."

Her youth, her beauty, her innate gaiety, charmed everybody. Even the women liked her, for American women are kinder than any others to other women. Is it because they are very sure of their own charms? Never mind, the fact remains, and is pretty to observe. In February Beechy took cold, and was ill for a week, after which she was taken to Lakewood.

Cressage had written frequently, and he wrote charming, expansive letters. He nussed her horribly, he adored her, he dreamed of her. He had the miniature she had sent him on a chain, and wore it round his neck.

Did she wear his little ring?

She did. It was, curiously enough, the only ring she had ever owned, an old one that had belonged to his mother, a very fine, small ruby set in gold tiger's claws.

Her letters to him were both rarer and shorter. Italian though she was, she could not express herself so well as he, and the sight of her own words on paper made her shy. She sent him no notices of her successes, but told him roundly, "Last night I made a huge success. They say no one ever sang 'Manon' as I do, because my voice is so fresh as well as well trained. I have beautiful costumes, and look lovely in them."

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Another time she wrote him, "I hardly could believe last night that it was my voice I heard Giulietta singing, it was so beautiful——" He used to smile over her letters sometimes.

One morning at Lakewood she received her home mail, and took it into the woods to read. It was a beautiful mild day, snowless and sunny. She sat down on a sheltered bench and looked through her budget. No letter from Charles!

It was ten days since she had heard from him, and she had been sure that she would have a letter to-day.

But now. A dozen or so perfectly indifferent communications, and then—one from Lady Charles.

Beechy's heart stopped for a second. He was ill—or dead.

"My dear Beatrice," the eccentric kind woman wrote, "just a line to ask you when you are coming back. No one seems to know. I have not seen Charles for some time, and, as you know, I never write to him. When you do come, I want you to visit me. It will be a good way of stopping a little malicious chatter I have heard of late, and, besides, I want to see you and I want you to see Sky Hill. So glad for all your success.

"Yours sincerely,

"CATHERINE CRESSAGE."

Beechy read the letter twice. Something was wrong. What did Lady Charles mean? And no letter from Charles.

After a long pause she opened the next letter, which was type-written.

"If you care for Charles Cressage," it said, "you had better come back and look after him. He is making a fool of himself over Lady Shallop, the new beauty.

"X. Y. Z."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE WOMAN IN THE BLUE CAPE

THAT bulwark of American Society, "Town Topics," gave Beechy her next blow. It is easy to say "Despise anonymous letters," but Beechy was madly in love, wise enough to realise that Cressage's position regarding her was, in spite of his beautiful acceptance of it, an anomalous one, and—she was in America and he in England.

Her first act, after long reflection over the two letters, was, in spite of her furious jealousy, one of trust in him. She had been, she said to herself, an idiot over Mrs. Bob Romney, she would trust him still. She cabled to him, using a little code they had drawn up together, "Do you still love me?"

How they had laughed over the absurdity of putting such a useless phrase into their code!

Now she used it and waited.

His answer, not in code, was simply, "Goose, of course." She read it a thousand times. Was it the expression of a bored man trying to put off an evil day of explanation, or was it a tender jest at her absurdity in doubting him? "Town Topics" seemed to answer her question.

"The beautiful Lady Shallop," it said, "who was in New York and Boston last winter, has taken a house in Charles Street, Berkeley Square, for the season. Young Alfred Paradyne, son of the copper king, seems to have recovered from his infatuation for this lovely red-headed Irishwoman, for he is reported to be engaged to a Rhode Island girl of no particular position. But the fair Edith

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never lacks adoration, and I am told by a friend in London that her latest victim is no other than a certain noble lord whose horse won the Oaks three years ago, and whose eccentric but charitable wife is the last of an historic house whose name died out with her father. The noble lord in question is seen everywhere in close attendance on Lady Shallop, and he makes no more effort to conceal this passion than he has to conceal the others, the number and variety of which have given to him the reputation of being the greatest Lothario in England."

That evening Beechy saw her throat specialist.

She was burning with fever, her eyes hollow and the peculiar baby look came to her face that suffering always brought to it.

"I am ill," she said. "I am worse."

"Your throat," he answered, "is not worse."

"No—but I—I am in trouble," she said, her hands clasped. "I must go home. You must give me a certificate——"

This he very gently refused to do, for she was not ill enough to justify it. Her contract was up in three weeks, but she could not wait. All night she paced up and down her room, the distracted Signora sitting in tears outside her door. And in the morning she was ill.

Her physician wrote out the statement that in his opinion she would be unfit for work for two months.

The opera management was very kind, although very sad, and the next day Beechy sailed, a silent, sombre, pale woman, who sat staring by the hour at the sea, the Signora and Aurelio guarding her against intrusion.

At Euston she bade them good-bye. They were to do whatever they liked for a week, except tell that she was in England. She would write to Aurelio. They were not to come to see her.

Nearly in tears they obeyed. They knew, poor souls, only that something had happened. Aurelio went to the address he had given her, the Signora to stop with a friend

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near Leicester Square. They obeyed her because they must, but they were heart-broken, the faithful friends.

They knew of her plans only that she was going to stay in town, and that she would write within a week.

She kissed them both, pulled down her thick veil, and took a hansom. Her plans were all made, and she carried them out with that perfection of detail that made her the artist she was.

She went to a private hotel near Russell Square, three houses painted the colour of bullock's blood, that had been turned into one—"Edinburgh House."

She engaged two back rooms high up, and gave her name as Mrs. Craddock—a name she had seen on a sign on her way from Euston.

She told her landlady that she was companion to a lady in the West End, who had to get her rooms out of the house for a week as she had guests coming, but that she, Mrs. Craddock, was to go to Mrs. Green's every morning, and to stay until after the dinner guests had left. "She entertains a good deal," she added.

Mrs. Toomey watched her keenly. "You 'ave no luggage, ma'am?" she asked.

Beechy smiled. "No—I shall of course dress there——"

She had silver bottles and brushes, etc., and her travelling dress was new and smart.

Mrs. Toomey gradually softened. Not that the woman altogether believed her new lodger's story, but she looked thoroughly respectable, her purse was full of gold, and in case she went out one fine day and never came back—there were the bottles and brushes instead of her three pounds.

Beechy did not go out that day. It was cold and rainy, and she was tired out.

But on Monday she left the house at about ten, and went to Clarkson's, where she bought a grey wig.

The wig on her head, she bought a cheap grey hat and a long blue golf-cape. In the dressing-room of a cheap

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hotel where she lunched, she made up, a very little, but sufficiently to change her face enough, combined with the wigs and her hat and cape, to prevent anyone from recognising her in a casual meeting.

It all sounds very far-fetched and impossible, but far-fetched things are often the easiest, and in certain natures the most natural in certain circumstances.

Every morning that week, then, a well-dressed young woman with a small bag went into one of the dressing-rooms at Victoria Station, and a few minutes later a badly dressed elderly person emerged with the same bag.

No one ever noticed her goings or her comings. Luck was on her side, and no power on earth is so strong as Luck.

For days, then, she watched Charles Cressage, and, thanks to his fondness for walking, it was fairly easy. If he took a cab she took another, and once she even took a motor and followed him as far as Knightsbridge.

For three days she drew a blank. He went as usual to his clubs; to see his sister, Mrs. Merrowdowne. He dined at different houses, he lunched once at the Brid-ports' and once at a house in Grosvenor Square. But never once did he go to Number 61 Chester Street.

Beechy had two pictures of Lady Shallop, one cut from the "Sketch," one from "Black and White," and she knew that she would recognise her if she saw her.

But Lady Shallop was not among the ladies she saw get out of their carriages at the houses he entered at lunch or dinner-time.

On the other hand he was a very unpunctual man, so after the first evening she walked about and waited until the parties were over, thus seeing the last of the guests leave. He did not, she could be fairly sure, see Lady Shallop during those first days.

Her spirits rose, and she began to hope again.

She was not in the least ashamed of what she was doing. The disguise, the travesty, would have amused her had

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she been in a light mood, and to her mind she was merely exercising her rights in watching Cressage. He was hers, and she was fighting for him.

But she must be sure. She could not make herself ridiculous a third time.

Once or twice a policeman advised her to go on her way, but her answers were ready, and policemen are human. Once Cressage turned sharply as he went up the steps of his club and looked her full in the face.

For a moment she thought he recognised her, but he was busy with his thoughts, and had looked through, not at her.

Thursday evening at about seven, she lost him. She was waiting outside his door, and as his motor was not there she half hoped he would be staying in, as he often did, dining in his rooms.

Suddenly, he came out, and at that moment a hansom rattled round the corner.

He jumped in and was off. Two more hansoms followed, but both had fares, and Beechy was left alone in the rain.

After a moment's acute misery she walked until she found a cab, and gave the address :

"61 Chester Street, Belgrave Square."

She was sure that he had gone there, and she was right. The house was a small one with very fresh paint. As they reached it a cab disappeared into the square. His cab, she was sure. She dismissed her own, and going down into the area of Number 59, sat down on the steps and waited.

The street was quiet that night. At the far end of it an awning indicated a festivity of some kind, but here where Beechy sat all was quiet.

Huddled in her cape she sat, the world's latest great soprano, her head on her knees, despair tearing at her heart.

He had looked so splendid as he left his door, his coat

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opening on his gleaming shirt-front. She had caught the scent of his gardenia as he passed her.

She seemed, as she waited in the cold damp, as if the last year was a dream, that she had never been warm and dry and full of comfortable food. That this, sitting in the darkness, shivering and miserable, was her share of the world.

And—in that house he was sitting laughing and talking, and crinkling his eyes at the beautiful Irishwoman he loved.

The indignity of her spying on him, as I have said, did not occur to her. To her primitive soul she was fighting for that which was hers. But her misery was intense.

Time passed, cabs and motors went by, carrying people who, because they were warm and satisfied, seemed to her to be of a necessity happy.

She had not long to wait. At about half-past nine a motor stopped at the door. It was his.

The chauffeur rang the bell and then waited.

"'Ello, my dear," he said when the door opened, "will you tell my boss we're 'ere?"

After a moment filled in by a giggle, he went on, "We're going to a music 'all, I take it? Too late for a play!"

Beechy crept close under the steps.

"You're going to the 'Empire,'" the parlour-maid said, "to see the noo bally!"

Then after another giggle the door was closed.

A few minutes later Beechy was walking rapidly towards Lower Belgrave Street, where she took a cab off the stand.

"'The Empire.'"

Lord Charles and his friends had a box, and as they looked down at the audience Beechy watched them from her place in the gallery.

Yes, Lady Shallop was beautiful with her red head and her white skin and her clean-cut, unpencilled black brows. She kept her furred velvet cloak round her, but her shoulders were bare, and on it flashed diamonds.

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The third member of the party was a little old man in a brown wig, who seemed to be deaf, for when Lady Shallop spoke to him, she made a shell of her hand and spoke through it.

Beechy scorned him as passionately as she hated her rival, for was he not the husband, and did he not go to sleep, and let Charles Cressage whisper, whisper—to his wife ?

As a matter of fact, Sir George Shallop was on his way home from Ceylon, where he had been looking after a rubber plantation he had there, and the old man was a great-uncle of Lady Shallop's, dragged away from the comforts of home at the last moment that evening to chaperon his lovely niece.

Cressage looked as he had looked ever since Beechy had been following him, ill ; but he was obviously keenly interested in Lady Shallop.

Beechy knew the signs, his nervous pulling of his moustache, his quick frowns, his way of leaning towards her when he spoke.

The ballet was beautiful, and Genée danced wonderfully, but neither Lord Charles nor his charmer paid the least attention to the stage.

Beechy watched, watched, watched. One of her neighbours, a young man who smelt of white rose, caught sight of her face and stared hard, but she did not see him.

It was true, then, Charles Cressage no longer loved her, and the world had come to an end.

CHAPTER XLIV

"CERTAINLY THE LORDSHIP OF LOVE IS EVIL"

FOR two days more the unconscious Cressage was followed by the woman in the blue cape. And during those two days she twice saw him go to the house in Chester Street. Once she saw him go to the "Carlton" at tea-time, and a few minutes later Lady Shallop came in smiling, beautifully dressed, radiating self-satisfaction and happiness.

Then Mrs. Toomey lost her strange lodger, and Signorina Cavaleone, accompanied by her companion and her secretary, reappeared at the hotel where they had lived the year before.

Beechy said nothing to her two friends about where she had been, and they asked no questions.

She looked desperately ill, and was extremely silent, but she was very gentle, and spoke calmly, asking Aurelio to telephone to her accompanist to come as usual every morning. The next day she went with the Signora to Relfern's to order clothes, and made all the other arrangements for her opera season.

"I suppose," the Signora ventured timidly, as they dined that first evening, "that the Signor Lord——"

"Lord Charles is in Paris," answered Beechy, and the matter dropped.

This was true. She herself had seen him start, the day before. When his train was well out of the station she drove boldly up to Lady Shallop's door.

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"'Er ladyship is out of town," said the parlour-maid not very uncivilly considering the blue cape.

"Ah, yes—to Paris, then——"

"Ow do *you* know?" returned the girl curiously, but the woman in the blue cape turned without a word and got into her hansom.

Beechy an hour or two later, clad in her dark travelling dress and a smart new hat, was walking out of Victoria Station, her bag in her hand, when she ran into Lady Charles Cressage.

"You!" The elder woman blinked anxiously at her, forgetting to shake hands. "I thought you were still in America."

"I have just got back," the girl answered. "And you—you are well?"

Lady Charles, whose short skirt and pork-pie hat were exciting considerable amusement in the bosoms of two ladies from Ealing passing at that moment, flushed a sudden, ugly brick-red. "Well, no. I have been worried to death. Listen—where are you going now?"

Beechy told her that she was on her way to pick up the Signora Scarpia near Leicester Square.

"Come with me first, I—I want to talk to you—that is, I think I ought——"

"Yes, I'll come with you. Have you a cab?"

The flustered peeress forgot for a moment, and then remarked that she had come in her motor.

"I've been seeing one of my cousins off. Oh, dear me, and I've lost Snob!"

After a short search, Snob was found peacefully and sensibly waiting for them at the motor's door, and the two women got in.

"Just drive to the Park, Auguste—round and round till I tell you to stop."

Then she turned to Beechy. "When did you hear from Charles?" she asked as if she were firing a pistol into the girl's face.

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"It—is some time ago."

"I thought so. Oh, the wretch, the villain!"

The poor lady's light green eyes filled with tears, behind which they looked like candied grapes. "I don't know how to tell you," she said, "but I feel that I must."

"I know," answered Beechy stonily.

Lady Charles peered at her. "Of course you do, you poor child, and that's why you look—like that."

There was a short silence, and then Beechy asked her friend to tell her all about it. "I know only the main fact and—her name," she explained.

Lady Charles blew her nose with a loud noise and gave her skirt an upward jerk, as if it were trousers, and she afraid of springing its knees.

"To make you understand I must go back—a long way. He was always like that. Always sincere, mind you, that's his one good quality, but as unstable as water. It—it nearly killed me at first. When he asked me to marry him I was nearly mad with joy. I was poor then, you know, and my two brothers were alive, and the second one married. Of course, no one thought I'd ever have the money. He married me because he liked the stock. He was always fond of horses, and that's how he put it. And I didn't so much mind his not loving me. I was so ugly I of course couldn't expect that. He fell in love with a girl who was visiting me, and as he behaved very well and went to the Cape to get away from her, I was as kind as I knew how to be—I wasn't angry. But before he reached the Cape he was in love with the wife of an officer going out to join her husband, and—oh, there was a disgraceful row, and the husband insulted Charles at the club. They had some kind of a duel, it is said, but no one knows. He was away for a year, and he no sooner set foot in England than he fell in love with Lizzie Lightfoot—a most awful woman. She came to me—a disgusting affair—and then I was angry.

"The others—I have forgotten their very names—

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came thick on the heels of each other—and—we separated. I couldn't stand it. Of late years I have lived very quietly. I never go out at night on account of my lungs, so I don't know much of his doings. When you appeared—you know, I did my best. But I failed. He was quite wonderful for a time—you had a very good influence on him, my dear," she added kindly, laying her hand on Beechy's. "He seemed marvellously changed, and told me that he thought he was. He came to see me one day——"

"Yes, I know."

"And when he left you at your villa he wrote to me just to say that you were an angel, and he—a saint. Poor Charles! I began really to have a faint hope that he might turn over a new leaf. And even now I believe that if he could have married you it might have lasted. However, he couldn't, and you went away, and—this happened.

"She is very pretty, and apparently mad about him. She's a lady by birth, but—her birth occurred some years ago. Her husband is a ninny. She has the money. Ten days ago, just after I wrote to you, I sent for him. We always see each other if one of us asks the other.

"He came, and I asked him. He was furious with me—raged about like a wild man; but I didn't mind that, of course. He didn't deny anything. He never does. She has evidently driven him nearly mad—that's her way. He was very strange about you. Refused to say one word about you. I wasn't sure you had not quarrelled. I asked him, but he only stamped about and swore to himself.

"Oh, my dear, I am so ashamed of him!"

She had, poor awkward lady, too much of that real tact that comes from the heart to tell the girl that she pitied her, and Beechy accepted her kiss gratefully.

Somehow Lady Charles' grief helped her. She had felt so utterly alone in the world, so poor and outcast, that it was balm to feel that this good woman's sympathy brought a certain amount of relaxation to her strained, taut mind.

"You are good," she said, and it was the first time for

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a week that she had had a thought for any creature under the sun beside herself.

The motor glided silently along, the trees wore the queer dark damp look they have just before the first leaves come. It was going to be spring.

"Are you going to see him?" asked Lady Charles suddenly.

Beechy looked at her as if her eyes were blurred by sleep, blinking and frowning.

"See him? I don't know. I had not got to that yet. He is in Paris now."

After a while Lady Charles gave the chauffeur the address of the Signora's friend near Leicester Square.

"Will you come to see me, Beatrice?"

"I—I will write to you. And—you will not tell him you have seen me?"

"I shall not see him again," answered her friend, suddenly grim.

"And—if I see him——" Beechy broke off short.

Lady Charles kissed her as they parted, but when Beechy had watched the motor disappear into the gathering fog, she turned away from the house and went to the little French church in Leicester Street.

Before an altar to the Madonna she knelt, her eyes closed, her hands clenched on her breast.

"Oh, Madonna," she prayed rapidly, "help me, help me, help me. He has left me and I am dying. He no longer loves me, and he loves her——" She broke off short, for she had nearly cursed that other woman, here in a holy place. "It will kill me, for I cannot live without him. But help me to be good. Help me to forgive him, as Lady Charles does. Help me to be good like Lady Charles. Oh, Mary, dear, Christ's mother, take away this awful feeling in my head, and make me stop thinking. Make me sleep. Oh, make me sleep! I want to be good—I want to be like Lady Charles. If I had not met her—oh, Mary, look what I have brought to you!"

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From her pocket she took a small revolver, and held it in her two hands like a votive offering.

"I had meant—I had meant to kill them and then me, but now I will not. See, here it is, O Lady of the Seven Douleurs, I give it to you—and you—give me peace instead—*la paix—la paix—*"

After a moment she rose. It was nearly dark in the little church. Two blue-frocked nuns in strange butterfly-like caps were telling their rosaries at the high altar, and in the silence the click of the beads was distinctly audible.

Looking round in a hasty, furtive way, the great singer, become a child in the hour of stress, crept quietly to the altar, and, reaching up, laid her pistol without any noise on the embroidered altar-cloth behind a vase of fuchsias that stood at the statue's foot.

Then she knelt again for a long time, and this time the rest and peace she so long needed came to her in the dusky place.

That evening, when she had gone to bed, the Signora and Aurelio talked things over in the sitting-room.

"It has to do with him," Aurelio said fiercely. "Curse him!"

"Yes, an apoplexy take him, of course it is! I wonder if she has seen him?"

They wondered on, wasting much time in that unprofitable occupation, but before they separated Aurelio formulated their line of action.

"We mustn't ask her any questions, Signora Evelina," he said; "we must just pretend not to notice, and try to be always here when she wants us, and out of the way when she doesn't."

Beechy had done nothing to deserve such faithful and loving friends, but there they were, suffering with her, thinking only of her, ready to do anything in the world for her. The world is a good place.

The days passed slowly. Beechy was gentle to every-

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one, but looked pitifully ill. She studied, saw the opera people, sent for her doctor, and faithfully took the tonics he ordered. Every afternoon she went out alone, and Aurelio, following her to the little church in Leicester Street, left her there and went back to the anxious Scarpia with a lighter heart.

"Church is good," he said.

To Aurelio she only once spoke of her grief, and this fact in itself, the fact that she had learned to be reserved, told the faithful soul how great her suffering was. Gone the stormy, tearful child, who only a year ago had sobbed out her sorrow in his arms, and in her place this absent-looking, pale woman with the great violet marks under her eyes.

One evening, a week after their return to the hotel, Beechy came into the sitting-room where he was writing.

"Aurelio——"

He turned. She had on a white dressing-gown, and her long black hair hung straight over her shoulders. She looked very young and very piteous.

"Do you remember," she said, "giving me a little book long ago, on my birthday, the evening we went to 'Aida'?"

"Yes, Bice dear, of course I remember."

"And you made me open it, while we waited for the 'bus, and put my finger on a verse?"

He nodded, remembering his superstitious horror at the time.

She held out the little book. "I just found it—I have been unpacking. Aurelio, do you remember what the words are?"

She came and stood near him, her arms hanging close to her sides.

"'Certainly the Lordship of Love is Evil,
Seeing that the more homage his servants pay to him
The more grievous and painful are the torments
Wherewith he torments them.'"

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"It is true, Aurelio, dear," she said, her eyes wide and fixed, "'the more grievous and painful are the torments.' You are so good to me, you and Signora Evelina, Aurelio, I wanted to tell you, but—I cannot talk about it——"

She laid her hand for a moment on his shoulder, and then went out of the room, the little book still in her hand.

CHAPTER XLV

LADY SHALLOP

THE afternoon before her first opera that season, Beechy had a letter from Charles Cressage.

"May I come to see you?" he wrote curtly. "I am just back from Paris."

His man waited for the answer, and she gave it to him almost at once.

"Dear Lord Charles," she wrote, "please do not come to see me. I forgive you.—Beatrice Cavaleone."

Then she went for a long walk with Cricket Londale, who had turned up again, looking quite as freckled and sunburned as if it were August instead of April.

"I have written a lot of poetry," the youth told her as they tramped by the Round Pond towards the Broad Walk, "and I'd like to read it to you if you don't mind."

"I shall like very much."

He watched her anxiously. Yesterday he had asked the old girl, as he called the Scarpia, if his divinity were ill, and the Signora, with unnecessary vehemence, had said no. But Beechy was ill, he knew, and it made him miserable. Another undeserved affection.

"You are tired," he said eagerly. "Let's sit down under that tree."

Beechy nodded. "Yes, I am tired. The first warm days, you know."

Some children were laughing over their little boats, their severe-looking nurses in hospital uniform (which practice is a deplorable one, and should not be permitted) watching

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over them. The grass was green, the sky blue, and flecked with snow-white clouds.

Beechy leaned back, and was silent as she watched a merry little boy in wide jack-tar trousers as he screamed with joy over his boat's swiftness.

She was glad to be with young Londale, for she liked him, and the mild air felt pleasant after the cold of New York.

Suddenly the young man said, "Oh, by the way, I saw Lord Charles Cressage in Paris the other night at the Café de Paris. What an awfully fine-looking fellow he is."

Beechy nodded. "Yes, isn't he?"

"He was with a cousin of mine, a chap named Shallop, an awfully decent little beggar. His wife is the beautiful Lady Shallop. She had on the biggest hat I ever saw in my life."

"Yes, she is very lovely—I have seen her," answered Beechy, smoothing the back of one glove with her other hand. "Do you like her?"

Londale hesitated. "Oh, well—'like'—I don't know. She's awfully jolly, but—I've always been fond of Archie Shallop, you see——"

"I see," Beechy answered quietly. It was strange, she thought, how quickly she had grown old. Only a few months ago she and this boy had been the same age. Now he seemed a child to her.

"I am told," she said after a moment, "that Lord Charles greatly admires your cousin—Lady Shallop, I mean."

Cricket chuckled. "*Rather!* But he doesn't much count in this way, I imagine. Archie says he's always mad over some woman. That's rather sickening, I think, don't you?"

"I do. Shall we walk on? Let's go past the palace and see the flowers."

They crossed the spongy grass to the Broad Walk and walked on, the boy talking eagerly.

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Off to their right the old palace basked in the pale sunlight, the trees were frothed with green, and the tulips and hyacinths stood up bravely on their stout little legs, like children playing at soldiers.

It was a delightful, languid, peaceful afternoon.

Near the Albert Memorial they met two men and a lady. Beechy did not see them at first. She was looking down.

"Hullo!" cried Cricket, giving a little hop like his namesake, "here they are, by Jove!"

Charles Cressage, a gardenia in his coat, bent over Lady Shallop as they walked, and he talked to her, for she was not so tall as he. Sir Archie was plainly bored. Just before Beechy and young Londale reached them, the little baronet stopped. "Well—I'll go back and speak to Peter," he said, "or get him on the telephone. You will take Edith home, Cressage— Hello, Cricket!" he added heartily, "how are you?"

They shook hands, and Beechy looked up at Cressage.

"'Ow do you do, Lord Charles?" she said quietly.

He held out his hand. He was very white, and his lips moved nervously. "How do you do?" he returned like an automaton.

Lady Shallop came forward. "Now, Lord Charles," she said with an intensely sweet smile, "here is your chance to keep your promise—I *have* so wished to meet you, Signorina—I am one of your greatest admirers. We are all coming to hear you to-morrow."

Cressage muttered something, and the two women's hands met.

"I am ver' glad," Beechy answered. "You like music?" Then she went on to Cressage, "I 'ope you are well?"

As they walked on she heard the little red-headed beauty exclaim, "But she hasn't an 'h.' How quaint!"

It had happened, then, Beechy told herself over and over again, and she still lived. He had had her note—he knew they were not to meet again—and here he was walking with *the new one*.

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For a moment the fierceness which had prompted her to buy the little revolver came back to her, and she could have wished to kill them both. But it is outraged pride more than outraged love that brings the wish for revenge with it, and Beechy was not proud. On the contrary, she was very humble, and the thought of her childish days in Rome seemed to set her in the dust at Cressage's feet.

"It is after all natural," she reflected, as she sped home alone in a hansom, having dismissed Londale; "he is a great gentleman, and I—what was I ten years ago?"

After a moment she added to herself, "He looks ill—so ill!"

She had a horrible night, dreaming of Cressage as he had been, waking to realise what he now was, and to sob herself to sleep again.

The next night she opened the season in "Manon," and her witchery and charm were amazing. She sang her very best, and she was in her careful make-up and beautiful rococo costumes deliciously pretty.

In a box she saw Lady Shallop and several other people, but Cressage was not visible.

And now began her wonderful season. Night after night she sang Marguerite, Carmen, Manon, Aida—rôles not usually regarded as suited all to one artist, but possible to her because of the extraordinary flexibility of her voice. And in her close attention to her work her health improved, at least apparently. Her colour came back, and the bones in her face receded to their proper place. She worked very hard, and her reward was great.

A royal personage gave her a diamond brooch; she was commanded to sing Manon on a royal birthday; the great people of England combined to do her honour.

And when young Dino Cavaleone came, and not only acknowledged but proudly claimed the cousinship, her triumph was complete.

Everyone knew that an English marquis asked her to marry him; at a week-end party she was presented to the

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First Gentleman in Europe ; and the story about Charles Cressage was either forgotten or overlooked.

Beatrice Cavaleone was the most sought-after woman in London that season.

Lady Cossie was delighted, and at Whitsuntide asked her down to Wychley again. "I am a year younger than I was last year," the old lady said gaily, tugging at the lace in her sleeves to coax it to hide her knobby old elbows, "and your adorer, Chris Bidfield, is longing to see you again."

But Beechy did not flinch as she regretted her inability to accept Lady Cossie's invitation.

"Well, well, my dear, I am sorry. I like you, and I enjoyed you last year. By the way, what an ass Charles Cressage is making of himself again, isn't he ? "

Beechy was graver than she had been a year ago, but she was more beautiful, and she had acquired through association and observation the grand air that belonged to her by birth.

The tragic woman of the early spring was as dead, in her turn, as the child of the preceding year, and behold the Beauty, armed cap-à-pie, self-possessed, serene, delightful ! She had never, since she came back, seen Cressage alone. They had met more than once, of course, but always surrounded by others. And the few commonplace words they exchanged were heard of everyone near.

He went his way, looking no longer ill, but inexpressibly bored, which was a sign for the runner to read.

"Tired of Edith Shallop, my dear," Beechy heard some woman whisper to another one night at a dance. "Just look at him ! "

Beechy looked too.

Lady Shallop, surrounded by eager men and boys, was flirting audaciously, and near her, like a patient footman waiting for his services to be required, stood Cressage, his arms folded. Bored !—yes, that was the word. A pang of pity came over Beechy, but she turned away.

Sometimes she wondered something. On Whit-Sunday

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she had received down in Kent, where she was staying, a big box full of wallflowers, pink and white ones. There was no card, and the box had been brought by a boy on a bicycle, who left no message.

Beechy was used to flowers; it was a kind of fashion, set by a young American who had come to London in her wake, to send her flowers of every kind, but no one hitherto had sent her wallflowers. Surely they came, they must come, from Cressage. She looked at them wistfully. If he had sent them they must be meant to remind her of the evening he had knelt by her in Lady Cossie's garden—the evening when he had asked her to help him to be good.

She set her lips. She had tried to help him. She had not failed him, it was he who had failed her. She went for a long walk that day, and wore a pink, velvety wallflower in her belt. When she came back the flower was limp and faded, but she put it away in a little bag with some other treasures.

And all this time no one mentioned her to Cressage, nor Cressage to her. One or two men had, as they put it, tried to draw him, but Cressage was fierce and unpleasant when he was annoyed, so he was let alone.

As to Beechy, the Signora Evelina and Aurelio never mentioned Cressage's name to her, nor did Lex Wauchope.

Wauchope's mother died in the spring, and he went about in his black clothes a very little ghost of a man. Beechy and he grew very fond of each other at this time, and he used to tell her long stories about dead-and-gone great-nesses of whom she knew nothing. His fantastic dressing of words pleased her very much, and his preference for love-stories over all others of course appealed to her.

Her favourite tale was about Fair Rosamond and her bold Henry. "It would," she used to say, "make an opera,—Henry the tenor, Rosamond the soprano, and the queen, of course, the contralto."

Sometimes they would plan the scenes, and Lex would describe to her the costumes she might wear. They became

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greatly attached to Fair Rosamond, these two wool-gathering friends, that spring!

Early in July Mrs. Pyecraft died. Beechy received a telegram just as she was going out to dinner on Sunday, and, telephoning her excuses, set out as she was to Fulham with Aurelio. It was a very warm night with, in the air, something of the electricity that makes night a thing so wonderful in the south.

Beechy was excited and nervous. "Poor old Aunt Augusta," she said, "she'd hate my coming, if she knew; but Uncle Henry is alive, and must be considered first."

They were in her electric brougham, a new acquisition, and rolled noiselessly south-westwards.

"She was very hard, poor woman, very narrow," Aurelio said after a while. He had always resented Mrs. Pyecraft's attitude towards Beechy regarding Cressage.

Beechy smiled a little sadly. "She was perfectly true to her type, as Wauchope says," she answered. "As she thought me wicked she was quite right not to see me."

Aurelio grunted. "*E morta*," he said; "and as she is dead I say no more."

They found St. Augustine's in the hands of Mrs. Batt, the wealthy friend who of late had become gratifyingly intimate there, and a Miss Timotheus, a maiden lady who filled to the best of her ability the obsolete rôle of hired mourner among her friends and acquaintances.

"Where is my uncle?" Beechy asked.

He was in the back garden, poor old man, sitting in his chair weeping. He looked very ridiculous and old and broken, and Beechy wept with him, herself suddenly bitterly unhappy. She was crying for her own loneliness, her own ceaseless heartache; but this poor Uncle Henry did not know, and every one of her tears fell like balm into his heart.

"She was proud of you, Beechy," he moaned, "whatever she said. She *allers* looked in the 'Morning Leader,'"

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he sobbed, "an' read about the opera. Oh, Beechy, she was a good woman—and I am all alone."

It was pathetic. The little garden was dusty and sun-burnt, the border of thrift hung faded in the light from the kitchen door. Overhead a moon in the first quarter shed a warm light, glinting on the neatly tied up lettuces under the window.

"I was going to cut the cukes for 'er to-morrow," the old man exclaimed, suddenly raising his head. "Come and look at 'em!"

Beechy followed him down the little path to where the glass of the frame gleamed like a pool of water in the moonlight among the shadows.

Two fine cucumbers lay in the frame, portly and solemn among the feathery leaves of some flourishing seedlings.

"That there one I was agoing to cut for 'er lunch to-morrow," the old man explained. "I said to her, 'You never ate a better one in your life, 'Gusta,' I said, and now——"

Kneeling down he burst out crying again, and Beechy, her rose-coloured cloak falling back from her bare shoulders, sat down on the edge of the frame, and sat, her hand on his shoulder, in silence.

CHAPTER XLVI

IN A BALCONY

IT was the third Friday in July, and Beechy and the Signora were leaving London the next day. At about five o'clock Beechy was sitting alone in her sitting-room. It was extremely close, and occasionally the sound of far-off thunder reached her. A sultry, ominous afternoon, and she, superstitious, wondered what was going to happen.

Suddenly—everything seems sudden on such days—the telephone bell rang.

"Allô ?"

After an inarticulate buzz she caught the voice. It was Mrs. Geoff Barminster speaking. Mrs. Geoff, who drove her own motors—this was some years ago—and bred bull-terriers. And Mrs. Geoff wanted Beechy to make one of a party of revellers who were going down to Brighton to spend the week-end.

"It is so hot," Mrs. Geoff's bluff voice boomed over the buzzing wires; "the sea looks good to me—and to you, I hope."

Beechy hesitated.

"If it isn't a big party—I am in mourning for an aunt."

But Mrs. Geoff pooh-poohed the idea of its being a big party. "Only two motors of us—nine or ten in all. Do come."

Now Beechy, like many superstitious people, had very often been justified in her forebodings and the like, and as she stood there in her cloud-darkened room talking to the lady in Bryanston Square, she felt a sudden certainty that Cressage was to be of the party.

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She had no reason for this belief, for only a few days before Mrs. Geoff had happened to mention to her that she knew him only very slightly. And Becchy was seized with an ungovernable longing to see him, to hear his voice.

"Very well," she said, "I will come. And—sank you very much."

Then she went and sat down again, and picked up her fan. Ever since Mrs. Pyecraft's death she had been trying to get away from town, but the old man had been ill, and she had shrunk from deserting him. Yesterday she had taken him to his sister's house in Derbyshire, and leaving him comfortably settled there until the autumn, when he was coming back to Fulham, she felt that her task was accomplished, and that she was free to go back to Italy.

And now—she was to see Cressage.

She had been brave, she knew, and good. She had made no moan, she had gone her way, done that which lay at her hand to do, and she had held her head high. Cressage himself must, she knew, be assured by this time of her complete indifference.

But to-day—the time had come when she must see him. And the god in the car was Mrs. Geoff. She smiled at the image, for Mrs. Geoff was at that time the woman who of all the women in London knew the most about motors. And—to-night—in an hour's time she would see Cressage. She told the Signora to postpone the arrangements for their departure until Monday. She dressed and sat down to wait. No one came to interrupt her brooding, and she gave her long-pent-up imagination a loose rein. She remembered, remembered, remembered, until with a cry she rose and walked up and down the room, her hands clasped on her breast.

It was all no good. Nothing helped. She loved him, and must love him until she died, and the sooner she died the better. Tears burnt her eyes, but she wiped them away, and drank some cold water to quiet her nerves. She wondered suddenly how Lady Charles was. She had not

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seen her since that meeting at Victoria, but someone had told her that she was at Beckenbrake.

Beechy would have liked to see her again, but she had not dared put herself in touch with Cressage even though the medium of his wife, and she had never made a sign of life to the older woman.

"I can ask him to-night," the girl thought suddenly. "I can ask him!"

It seemed to her as if she could not bear the joy of it. She forgot his falseness, the suffering he had caused her, the scorn his fair-minded wife felt for him. She remembered only the eyes of him and the sound of his voice.

When Mrs. Geoff came in for her she was ready, a red rose in her coat, a bright colour in her cheeks.

"It is good of you to come," the big woman said, rolling down the passage to the lift (her father had been an admiral, and she always said she inherited his walk), "they are all delighted."

The two motors were nearly full, but Cressage was not there. Beechy, placed between a Miss Peregrine and a strange man who looked like a Jew, and instantly told her he wasn't one, drew a deep breath. He was to be there, she knew, but—

"Now then, all ready? Off we go to St. James's Place."

Beechy burst into a little laugh, at which Miss Peregrine not unnaturally looked surprised.

"You are to get in with me, Lord Charles," Mrs. Geoff explained as Cressage came out of his door. "You know Signorina Cavaleone and Miss Peregrine—Pickle for short. Oh, and Mr. Curry."

She wasted no time on ceremony, Mrs. Geoff, and in two minutes Cressage was sitting on Beechy's left, while Mr. Curry, the Jewish-looking Gentile, faced them.

Beechy and Cressage had shaken hands, and now sat silent. Mrs. Geoff's driving was reckless in the extreme, and once or twice Miss Peregrine gave a little shriek, and

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Cressage looked grave. It was extremely warm, and the sky was black.

"We're in for a ducking," observed Curry after a while.

Then he and Miss Peregrine began to talk.

"How much longer are you to be in England?" asked Cressage presently.

Beechy looked past him. "I was to have gone to-morrow, but have put it off until Monday."

"I ought," he said in Italian, "to tell you that I knew you were coming to-day."

"I quite understand," she said coldly. Curry, bobbing about on the little seat opposite Miss Peregrine, was very noisy. Neither he nor the girl had ears for anything but their own nonsense. Cressage sat forward, and Beechy leaned away from him into her corner, but his arm touched hers from the shoulder down, and she could see him breathe as she looked towards him under her flat cap-brim.

Near Three Bridges the other motor left them behind, for something had happened to one of Mrs. Geoff's tyres, and she and the mechanic got out and began to tinker at it.

"You see to the rooms, Geoff," she called in her great voice, "and order dinner; we'll not be long."

Miss Peregrine and Curry got out and sat down on a dusty bank by the road.

"Do you care to get out?" asked Cressage.

"No, thanks."

He turned and looked at her closely. "Do you wish to be let alone," he said abruptly, "or may I talk to you?"

"Just as you like."

He paused for a minute, and then went on doggedly, "Well, I suppose there is no use in my explaining?"

It was such happiness just to be near him and hear him speak that a little laugh came to her lips.

"Explaining? But there is no need," she said.

He misunderstood her laugh, and relapsed into an angry silence.

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Presently she said, "How is your wife?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

There was a long pause, and then he said gently, "Beatrice, I know what a beast I am, but—do you believe that I am sorry for hurting you—if it did hurt you?" he added in haste, to give her a loophole if she should choose to accept it.

But she did not. "Hurt? Yes, it hurt. But it's quite all right now."

"I love you, you know," he added, not in an access of passion, but in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice as if no one could ever have doubted his love.

She sat quite still for a moment, and then she repeated slowly, "You love me?"

"Yes, I do. I have always loved you. Oh, I can't expect you to understand, no woman ever would—at least no girl. But it is true all the same. My God," he went on, facing her again and speaking very rapidly, "you don't think I ever felt about Edith Shallop as I did about you? Can't you remember the villa?"

She did not answer until he had repeated his question, and then she said shortly, "Yes, I remember."

"Now then, children, in you get!" roared Mrs. Geoff, rubbing her hands together and then putting on her goggles, "*that* little job's done!"

Miss Peregrine and her admirer obeyed, and as the motor started off with a bound Cressage went on talking.

"If you had seen me when you first came back, I would have told you—at least—what I could—but you wouldn't. You didn't help me much," he added bitterly, and Beechy laughed.

"Help you! Did you need it?"

She spoke scoffingly, but he paid no heed to her tone.

"Yes, I did—if a man tottering on the brink of heaven over hell needs help. I loved you, I tell you. That is what you didn't realise."

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"I say, Signorina Cavaleone," began Miss Peregrine suddenly at this point, "which do you think sings the best, Aubépine or Subiaco?"

Beechy answered her, and the conversation remained general for a long time. When it had ceased Beechy leaned back and closed her eyes. What would happen next?

By seven o'clock they were nearly at Brighton.

"We're going to dine and then take a spin by moonlight—if there is a moon," explained their jovial hostess.

Cressage darted a quick glance at Beechy.

"Don't go," he said in Italian, using an involved phrase to express his meaning, "I want to talk to you."

At ten o'clock they sat alone together on the balcony of Mrs. Geoff's sitting-room. The others had gone to Eastbourne, piled into one motor.

Beechy, in her black frock, looked very pale in the moonlight. Cressage saw it. "You are tired," he said suddenly, sitting down by her and frowning.

"Yes, I have had a sad time of late. My poor old uncle has been very ill and very unhappy."

"Your uncle? Cavaleone?"

"My Uncle Pyecraft in Fulham. His wife died a little while ago."

"Poor Beatrice!" After a pause he went on in a low voice, "I have no right to beg your pardon—I have no right to assume that you will pardon me. But you wrote that you did."

"Yes."

"And if you knew how miserable I have been the whole time since you left for America, you would be sorry for me."

And looking at his face she knew that he spoke the truth.

"I am sorry, Carlo," she said gently.

All the wild feelings of the early afternoon had fled, leaving in their place the old sensation of rest, the sensation she had always experienced in his presence. It was a feeling of having reached home at last, although she

IN A BALCONY

knew it could not last. Yes, it was home. She longed to take his hand and comfort him, but something kept her hands quietly folded in her lap, her eyes fixed on the black, silver-edged clouds that were scudding across the sky.

"I—I missed you unbearably, Beatrice. That—that is why I got into mischief. If—if you had never heard of it, I honestly believe it would have passed away with no harm to anyone."

"And—to her?"

"Lady?—ah, bah!" He laughed contemptuously. "She simply doesn't count, my dear. But that's what I can't expect you to understand. But you did find out, and—you wouldn't see me. Mind you, I am not blaming you. You were perfectly right. A man who can't be faithful for six months to the woman he adores deserves all he gets—he is a swine! But—there you are—I *am* the man who couldn't be faithful to—to *you*, great God! What I mean is that when you cast me off she seemed—well—all I had left, and I—tried to make the best of her, and to—to stick to her."

Becchy did not answer. By this time she had heard from more sources than one what kind of a woman Lady Shallop was, and she felt no squeamish reluctance to hearing her enemy given her due. She was primitive enough to enjoy Cressage's open scorn of the woman who had been no more to him than she had been to several other men. But she could not decide what to say, and therefore she was silent.

"Try," he said after a long pause, "not to judge me too harshly."

• She held out her hand as she rose.

"I do not judge you harshly," she answered in a low voice. "It is all done with now, and indeed I did forgive you when I wrote you I did."

He looked at her hopelessly. He had spoken the absolute truth. And as she stood there she seemed to him the embodiment of all earthly perfections

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"Beatrice," he cried suddenly, drawing her to him by the hand he still held, "could you——"

But she stopped him by a gesture.

"Hush! No—and—good night."

She was gone, and he sat smoking in solitude until the others came back, tired and clamouring for food and drink.

"Miss—the furrin lady went to bed before eleven, madam," Mrs. Geoff's maid told her. "She 'ad a 'cadache, and asked me to unhook her frock."

"Poor Lord Charles!" exclaimed Mrs. Geoff, bustling on to the balcony a moment later, "I *am* sorry. I thought you'd have a delightful evenin', but how bored you must have been."

"Oh, no," he returned politely, "I was not bored."

CHAPTER XLVII

"CERTAINLY THE LORDSHIP OF LOVE IS GOOD"

ONE afternoon, late in the following March, Beatrice Cavalcione stood by the fireside in her little house in Buckingham Gate, reading a letter.

She had been in Russia all the winter, and looked the better for the bracing cold there; but her eyes were red with crying, and she wore a black gown.

War was claiming its hideous payment, and among those who had fallen in South Africa was gallant young Cricket Londale, whose broken old father had just left her.

"He told me about you," Sir William had said, holding her hand, "and in the last letter I had from him he enclosed—this, for you, and asked me to come and see you."

Beechy read the letter, and then as the suddenly frail old man put his hands over his face she knelt by him and held him in her arms, her tears wetting his white hair.

It was a daring, a demonstrative thing for a stranger to do, and no Englishwoman in the circumstances would have done it; but Beechy did not know that, nor would she have cared if she had known. And the bitter-tongued old politician wept as he had been unable to weep hitherto all the weeks since the news came.

After a time he sat up, wiped his eyes, and asked her gently, "And you, my dear, you too have lost someone?"

"I have lost Cricket," she said simply; "he was my friend."

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Since the young fellow's death no one had dared call him by his nickname to his father. He had been spoken of as 'Gerald,' and now Sir William smiled. "Ah, yes, 'Cricket'—you called him that? And you are wearing black——"

Beechy made a little gesture expressing a difficulty of explanation. "Ah, I love England," she answered, "and so many are gone—I do not care for colour just now. Lady Cossie Black calls me an eediot—I think she thinks I have no right to a black frock, as I am 'only an Italian,' but——"

Sir William rose. In ordinary days her garb of woe might have seemed to him, as it did to some others, either an affectation or an unwarrantable assumption of what Germans call "a share-taking"—"theilnahme." But now the stricken old man saw in it the honest sympathy and tribute it was, and he forgot to say to himself that theatrical women do theatrical things.

He took his leave, and Beechy read her letter. It was from Mafeking. Short, merely a few words of gallant excitement, and of affectionate turning of his heart homewards. "Of course I know you are unhappy," he said at the last, "and I do hope with all my heart that things may turn out all right. All my love to you.—Cricket."

Beechy kissed the paper and wept over it.

She had had a busy summer, and a busier winter. All summer long she and the Signora were in Italy, first at Salsomaggiore, where she took a cure for her rather tired throat, then in the mountains near Turin, where she had hired a shabby little villa. Her accompanist was with her, and she learned "La Bohème," in which she was to make her next season's début in London.

It was not an unhappy time. The Signora, comfortable fat lady, released from the bonds London imposed on her, sat about in loose garments from morning till night, not infrequently lamenting over Beechy's amazing ardour in the matter of learning.

Why, after working all winter and making all that

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money, need the girl work at French and English all summer ?

But Beechy only smiled and worked on.

In the neighbourhood there was a large hydropathic, among whose guests were a young Englishwoman and an old Frenchman, both more than willing to help pay for their expenses by giving lessons. Every other afternoon they came, turn and turn about, and with them Beechy made steady progress in the two languages. The ambitious Miss Smith (whom Beechy first hailed as a probable relation) introduced her to Carlyle, but of him the *prima donna* would none, clamouring for Dickens, of whom she knew already a little, and who remained her favourite author.

Perhaps she was not so much bent on improving as she was on occupying her mind. However that might be, she worked hard, even learning some poetry by heart.

M. Ferrier, the old Frenchman, taught her to speak his beautiful language far more correctly as to accent than she ever learned to speak English, but she refused the classics to a man, until one day he had an inspiration, and wrote to Paris for a copy of "Laboulaye."

Fairy tales she loved, and they were absolutely new to her. Her first comment upset her teacher.

"They rather remind me of the lives of the saints," she said innocently, and he, very devout, was frightened. But seeing her the next day in the ugly little village church praying busily, he took heart of grace.

Aurelio that summer was happier than he had been for a long time. Beechy was busy, cheerful, and well, and the faithful young man began to hope that she was forgetting Cressage.

One day Beechy followed Aurelio into the garden, where he was smoking. "Aurelio," she said, "I am going to sing in a charity concern in Rome in November. It is for the people in that place that was destroyed by fire—Val d'Anca."

"But you were going——"

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"I know. But I'll arrange that. You see, I like to—to help with my voice. It is—a kind of trust, isn't it? and besides, it makes me happier to sing for people, not just for money."

"You're very good, Bice." The young man threw away his cigarette and put his hands into his jacket pockets.

"I? Nonsense, Aurelio, I am not good at all. Think how disagreeable I was to you the other day about that letter you forgot. I am," she burst out dramatically, her eyes wide, "a horrible tyrant, that's what I am. Aurelio!"

Aurelio smiled at her, and then said seriously, "Bice, may I speak to you about—about that little book, Dante's 'Vita Nuova'?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Well, I have been thinking about it of late. I wanted to tell you this before we left London, but I—I didn't quite like to. You remember that about The Lordship of Love?"

Again she nodded. He could see that she remembered the words.

"Well, one day in London I was reading the book, and I found another sentence about—that. I wanted to show it to you, but——" He hesitated, his brown eyes fixed on hers.

"Tell it to me now, Aurelio."

Gently she held out her hand, with the gentleness which, coming, a quite new quality, just at the time when her suffering had been the most acute, gave such appositeness to his discovery in the little book.

Holding her hand he gave the quotation—

"Certainly the Lordship of Love is good,

Seeing that it diverts the mind from all mean things——"

There was a pause. He longed to tell her how clearly he saw that it was diverting her mind from mean things, from her own self-centredness, her ruthlessness, her occasional violence, her selfishness.

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But he dared not.

Her eyes slowly filled with tears. “Thank you, Aurelio dear,” she said in a soft voice. Then she left him.

One day she received a letter in Cressage’s writing, and after a long disappearance into the pine woods behind the villa, came back pale and tired-looking.

“Oh, Beatrice!” he burst out in spite of himself.

She smiled. “Don’t, Aurelio dear. He wants to come and see me, but I have written to say no.”

She sat down, closing her eyes wearily. “You see,” she went on, half to herself, half to him, as he stood looking at her in silence, “there is no use. He is not to be trusted.”

“But—if he still love you, dear, you ought to forgive—his little unfaithfulness—men are like that, and if his heart is true to you.”

For the first time Beechy claimed her Anglo-Saxon blood.

“No. I am half English, remember, Aurelio, and—*my man* must be faithful to me.”

He said no more, and Beechy, having departed from her long silence, handed him the letter. It was short and matter-of-fact in tone, telling her that Cressage was to be in Italy in September, and asking her if he might come to see her.

He did not write again.

Once Lady Charles wrote to her asking for money for Sky Hill. “We have had to turn away a good many,” the letter said, “and we are out of funds. I have done all I could, but you know how many claims there are on me. . . .”

It then went on to ask Beechy not to forget her promise to come to Beckenbrake, and from thence visit Sky Hill and sing to the girls at one of their parties. No mention of Lord Charles was made.

The first of October Beechy went to Rome. Signora Evelina was obliged to stay in Turin to nurse a sister who had been very ill, and Beechy and Aurelio travelled south together.

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She left him at the door of the convent, and a moment later sat among the delighted Sisters in the refectory.

She spent a month in the quiet place, working, and playing with the children, before going north.

It was fine weather, a dreamy golden October. The garden in which she had dug as a child was still gay with flowers, the fig tree in the corner covered with sweet purple fruit.

Beechy wore a coarse grey frock made by the tailor-Sister, and a flat brown hat like the one she had worn years ago.

Once, when she was walking in the long line of children as they took their walk, she was startled by meeting the young marquis who had asked her to marry him. He was walking with another man, and they both, it seemed to her, stared straight into her face. But they did not know her, and she went her way laughing. "Fine fezzers," she said to herself, employing one of the proverbs she had learned in the summer, "make ze bird!"

She was now very proud of her English.

Often she used to read aloud to Father Antonio or to the Mother Superior, whose eyes after her operation had remained delicate.

Sister Caterina, she of the legendary lore, found in the great lady who had once been little Bice, a wonderful listener. Beechy sat with her by the hour, working away at the vegetables while her old friend told her stories of the saints. They were, Beechy thought, nearly as good as "Laboulaye."

All the simplicity in her character was now in the ascendant. Life seemed to her a pleasant thing, although there was always in her heart the wound that opened at a touch.

And after all she was only twenty-three.

One day there was an awful scene in the garden. The post had come, and after reading her letters Beechy unfolded her English papers. She was sitting quietly there under the trees, Mother Maria Magdalena beside her, when

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suddenly she rose, her face white with rage, her eyes full of hatred.

"Liar!" she cried furiously. "The animal! the *canaglia*!" And then, in that quiet place, she used words that caused the poor Mother Superior to cross herself with trembling fingers.

"Bice! Bice, stop!" The old woman's voice was stern.

But Beechy was walking up and down, muttering to herself, the newspaper twisted in her hands.

Nuns have much dignity.

Mother Maria Maddalena rose quietly. "When you have come to your senses, my child," she said, "I wish to speak to you." Then she went into the house.

Three hours later Beechy knocked at her door.

"Forgive me, *Madre Cara*," the girl said, kneeling impulsively by her, "I am so sorry."

Someone had started a story that Cavaleone had lost her voice, and would be obliged to retire.

She had wired at once to the principal papers, and that afternoon went to Professor Archangeli, the great throat specialist, and after singing for him and having her throat thoroughly examined, had made him write a certificate to the effect that her voice and throat were in magnificent condition.

This she sent to the powers that be at Covent Garden Opera House. Then she went and apologised to the Mother Superior.

The next week, however, brought her dozens of letters from friends, acquaintances, and perfect strangers, asking for the truth, sympathising, hoping that their sympathy was unnecessary.

The girl was greatly touched. She felt an immense love for all these people who loved her voice, for her voice was the best part of herself, and who loved her voice loved her.

She answered all the letters, and when the two misinformed newspapers apologised, she wrote her forgiveness to them.

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In November, after the concert, she went to Milan, and then on to Berlin, where she sang in a concert, by special permission from the opera people in Petersburg, and then came her wonderful winter in that city.

She was very gay, very brilliant, but—her England was in mourning, and the papers were full of bad news for her. Charles Cressage had rejoined his old regiment, and sailed early in November. She knew this from the papers, but Lady Charles wrote too:

"You will, I am sure, be glad to know that Charles has gone to the front. Even if he should be killed I shall be glad he went. It is the right life for a man. . . ."

And Beechy was glad, too. Somehow she never feared for his life. She feared for Tom Bridport and for Cricket Londale, and for one or two others, but never for him.

He was at Modder River and at Colenso, where poor Bridport lost a leg.

Then came the siege of Ladysmith. "I feel," wrote Lady Charles, "that Ladysmith will fall, and that he will be killed."

But still Beechy was not afraid. When her season in Petersburg was over she sent Aurelio on ahead to London to take a house for her, and she and the Signora went to Paris for a few weeks. Cricket Londale fell at Mafeking, Lady Cossie had lost a cousin, and the Honourable Bob Romney was dead of enteric.

London was a tragic place, and the first time Beechy went out, dressed in a gay blue frock, she met a dozen women she knew, all in black.

Feeling herself to be a heartless monster, she ordered black frocks, and wore them despite the Signora's superstitious horror.

That March afternoon, when Sir William Londale brought her the letter from his dead son, Beechy had been in London ten days. She had seen Mrs. Bridport and her husband, and watched with a sick heart his forced jollity over his crutches. She had seen Lex Wauchope, who told

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her all the news, and she had written to Lady Charles, but received no answer.

It was a blustering, cold afternoon, reminding her of the days when she was following Cressage, and she sat close to the fire in her little drawing-room.

Cricket's brave little letter on her lap, she sat looking into the red coals.

Presently the door opened, and the parlour-maid appeared.

“Lady Charles Cressage, miss.”

CHAPTER XLVIII

BEECHY TAKES UP A NEW DUTY

"MY dear," Lady Charles said, "he has come back."
"Come back?"

"Yes. Invalided home. It seems he had fever in Lady-smith and never got over it. They had to carry him out of Mafeking, and they have sent him home. He didn't write to me, of course, but when he got home he sent for me. Put on your things and come."

There she stood, the bringer of news, badly dressed, red-nosed, bony, absurd but for her look of breeding.

Beechy stared at her as if she had been an angel with azure wings.

"I am to come?" she whispered.

"Yes. He is ill, so of course that changes everything."

"Of course."

Cressage might be unfaithful, careless—he might have been far worse than he was—but his illness changed everything. If he wanted her he should have her.

Without a word she went upstairs, and as she was putting on her hat Lady Charles called to her.

"Bring your dressing-case. He is at Beckenbrake."

Ten minutes later they were in the motor.

"Is he dying?" asked the girl after several minutes of unbroken silence.

"I don't think so. He was fairly well when he sailed, but got worse on the ship."

Beckenbrake is in Kent, just over the border from Surrey. The wind blew, and gusts of rain blurred the windows as the powerful motor flew south-eastwards.

BEECHY TAKES UP A' NEW DUTY

They talked little, both were busy with their thoughts. As they passed Mitcham Beechy asked suddenly, "Does he know I am coming?"

"Yes," returned Lady Charles shortly. "He knows."

She offered no explanations beyond the ~~math~~ facts she had given, and Beechy asked no more.

It was enough to her that she was going to him.

Three miles out of Epsom the motor broke down, and for an hour the two women walked up and down the road in the chilly dusk while the chauffeur worked. Beechy, from long habit, tied a silk scarf closely about her throat, and turned up her coat collar, but she did not really feel the cold.

Her voice was forgotten, except subconsciously. Her whole mind was occupied with Charles Cressage.

"People will think him mad for coming to my house," Lady Charles burst out suddenly, as they settled themselves once more in the motor, "and me mad for taking him in, but that doesn't in the least matter."

"Of course not."

Again the busy silence fell. After a long time the elder woman spoke again.

"We are nearly there, Beechy," she said, "and—the thing for you to remember is—not what he is dear, but—that you love him."

"Yes," answered Beechy.

"After all," went on Lady Charles, laying her hand on the girl's, "that is all that matters—what we give, not what we get."

Presently the motor stopped, and they got out at a long stone terrace, at the top of which an open door sent out a broad shaft of light.

"How is his lordship, Putnam?"

"A little better, my lady, the nurses say."

Unbuttoning her motor-coat, the same one in which she had appeared nearly two years before at Lady Cossie's, Lady Charles tore it off and dropped it on

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the floor before the man could turn from the door he was closing.

"Come," she said.

Beechy followed her up the broad uncarpeted oak stairs, down a long passage with doors on one side, windows on the other, through a pleasant little dark red room with a huge fire on the hearth. Then she stopped.

"Wait here for a moment," she said, and opened a door and disappeared.

Beechy stood by the fire. This then was Beckenbrake, where Lady Charles, that mad creature, as many people called her, lived her lonely, unselfish life.

Beechy loved Charles Cressage, but she never for a second doubted that the faults between him and his wife were all on his side.

And here, when he was ill and sad, the prodigal husband had crept back, sure of a kind welcome.

Surely the ugly, grotesque woman was one of the Good of this World.

"Beatrice, will you come?"

The room was dimly lighted, but a fire was burning redly, and its flickering flames danced over the sick man's face. His eyes were open and as they fell on Beechy he smiled a gay little smile.

"How good of you!" he said, holding out his hand. "Now that I am ill you are both kind to me."

Lady Charles told the girl to sit down, and then, rather suddenly, she sat down herself.

"He is better," she said; "the nurse tells me he is much better. It was the fatigue of landing that made him seem so much worse."

He looked very ill, however, and Beechy's lips shook as she watched his face.

"Beatrice," he said, "will you forgive me?"

"Yes. I do—I did—always."

He frowned impatiently. "I don't mean that. I mean, will you give me another chance?"

BEECHY TAKES UP A NEW DUTY

His voice was so weak that she had to lean towards him to hear the last words.

Then she sat back in her chair, her cheeks scarlet.

"Say yes, Beechy." It was Lady Charles who said the words.

Beechy clasped her hands tightly. "But—how can I—how can we?" she murmured confusedly. "I don't see——"

The sick man held out his hands. "Kitty, take my hand. And you, Beechy——"

The two women knelt by him obediently, and he smiled his old beautiful smile, but touched by something between pity and tenderness. "Tell her, Kitty," he said.

"*H'm!* Well, Beechy, I told you in the motor to forget what he is, and to remember only that you love him. He is ill now, and—pathetic, but he is going to get well, and—you know our English saying about the impossibility of teaching an old dog new tricks."

Cressage burst into a feeble laugh, and then drew his wife's bony hand to his lips. "You mean the one about the silk purse, Kitty——"

Lady Charles did not seem to notice what he had said. "He will *not* really reform," she went on slowly, "he will always—more or less—run after women. He will cause you many a heartache. And you will wish—many things. But"—her voice changed, and the incorrigible artist in Beechy watched eagerly the priestess-like look in her weather-beaten face—"he loves you. His love, that is to say the best there is in him, is yours. In spite of everything, I, who, you know am not at all prejudiced in his favour, am convinced of that. The best of him is yours. And—this being so, will you as he put it a moment ago, give him another chance?"

To Beechy it seemed that the wall opposite her rocked as if in an earthquake.

She stared at Lady Charles, and saw that the elder woman's wrinkled brow was covered with drops of sweat.

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"I—I *don't* understand," she said slowly. "I suppose I am stupid, but——"

"Tell us just what you think, my dear," answered Lady Charles.

"I think—I fear—it's no use," the girl answered. "I—it nearly killed me. I *don't* think I could live through it again. Nobody knows how—how bad it was——"

They did not answer, and after clearing her throat she went on.

"I think you are an angel, Lady Charles, and—yes, I love you, Carlo, just as I always did, only more, because I—seem to understand things better now. But—I couldn't go on seeing you."

"He will be good, Beechy."

She gave a little forlorn laugh. "You know he couldn't!" she said. "You said so yourself!"

Then Lady Charles drew her to her feet, and sitting down in the big chair she had left to kneel by the bed, made the girl sit beside her.

"Beechy," she said tenderly, "listen to me. I failed in my duty. I gave up, lost courage, deserted him. And now—I hand my duty over to you."

"But——"

"Hush! Don't be shocked. I have known it for nearly a year, and—I don't mind—I am going to die. It may be a few weeks, or, at the outside, it may be a year. And—you must take care of him for me."

Beechy listened dully, her face almost stupid. Then as she understood, she burst into tears, and flung herself into Lady Charles' arms.

"Hush, my dear, hush—you must not excite him—you must not excite *me*——"

After a time the girl quieted herself and put three or four sharp questions. Was Lady Charles sure? What *was* it? Could she not see other doctors?

And Lady Charles answered her patiently, stroking her hair.

BEECHY TAKES UP A NEW DUTY

Charles Cressage lay there in his bed, watching the two women whose lives he had so strongly influenced.

"Kitty," he said at last, as Beechy stood by the fire wiping her swollen eyes, "you are the best woman I ever knew in my life, and I believe you will go to heaven and be happy there. Kiss me."

Tenderly, but not much impressed by his perfectly sincere little outburst, she bent and touched his brow with her big mouth.

"Thank you, Charles. Now—talk to her——"

She left the room, and Beechy came back to the bed.

"She—she is a saint," the girl said, still with a sob in her voice.

"Yes," he answered gravely. Then he went on: "Beatrice, listen to me. It is all true what she says, all true. But—I have suffered, dear, this past year, and—I don't like to boast"—he smiled—"but I think I have learned some things. I shall be—good to you, dear. And, what is more, I believe that if a year ago you and I had been even engaged to be married, *that* would not have happened. There was never in it, on my honour, one minute in which I even thought I loved her. Some day you will understand that I was in a—queer position. And, what poor Kitty means, is this. It is quite true that she is dying. And she wishes us, you and me, to marry as soon as—as it is over."

"Oh, isn't she wonderful, wonderful?"

"Yes, she is. And—until then—we, you and I, are to be—engaged, though, of course, no one shall know. It is her own idea, and her sincere wish."

There was a long pause.

"Beatrice," he went on, taking her hand, "will you do what she wishes?"

"Yes, Carlo."

"And—will you try to trust me? I have not deserved it, God knows, but—I will, in the future."

Beechy kissed his hand. "Carlo—I, too, have learned

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some things, and—perhaps I understand a little. If—if—dearest—there is nothing I could not forgive you.”

Then he took her into his weak arms, and she laid her head on his breast.

In the dusk of the firelit room a little clock struck six. Beechy rose.

“I must go and look for her,” she said.

THE END

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